

# Nicaraguan women & HIV prevention

## Why spreading scientific knowledge is not enough

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### Introduction

A number of individual, cultural and socio-economic factors define the vulnerability of women to HIV infection. Factors such as limited knowledge about HIV and AIDS, low risk perception, culturally prescribed sexual norms, unequal power divisions within relationships, lack of economic independence and lack of government commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS all contribute to the vulnerability of women to HIV infection. Among these issues, a low risk perception of women is one of the most important. Women who do not consider themselves at risk of infection will not be willing to take necessary precautions to protect themselves. It is therefore important to study in how far women feel that they are at risk of infection and what particular factors shape their ideas and perceptions.

Like women in other countries in Latin America and elsewhere, many Nicaraguan women believe that they will not get HIV. A study carried out by Sari Kiel in the framework of her Master in Medical Anthropology & Sociology identified the factors that may put them at risk of infection. The study took place in the city of León, Nicaragua, in the second quarter of 2009. Twenty-four women participated in the study. All of them were beneficiaries of the microcredit organization Fundación LEON 2000, one of the members of ASOMIF (*Asociación Nicaragüense de Instituciones de Microfinanzas* – Nicaraguan Association of Microfinance Institutions). ASOMIF is participating in the project 'Integrating HIV/AIDS in microfinance' supported by STOP AIDS NOW! One of the goals of this project is to reach clients of microfinance organizations with information about HIV and AIDS, another one is to increase the possibilities of people living with HIV to access microcredit programmes. Staff of LEON 2000 kindly invited Ms Kiel to carry out her research and assisted her as much as possible. The director, Mrs Raquel Maria Pastora, has been highly interested in the subject of integrating gender and health issues in a microcredit organization and her assistance has been indispensable.

The central research question was: Which factors impact on the susceptibility to HIV infection of the female clients of LEON 2000 and what is the importance of equal gender relations and (economic) empowerment of women for an effective response to HIV/AIDS in Nicaragua?

### LEON 2000 and its clients

With about 17,000 inhabitants, León is the second largest city of Nicaragua. An estimated 60 percent of the population lives in poverty, a quarter of which experience extreme poverty. At the time of the study, LEON 2000 had 9,555 beneficiaries, mostly women. The organization's main purpose is to contribute to the socio-economic and cultural development of León and surroundings. One of its activities is to hand out loans to small businesses and to people who would like to start on their own. The twenty-four women who were interviewed all had received financial support from LEON 2000 to set up a micro-enterprise – for example a home-based bakery, a soda or fruit juice stall, a cheap eatery, or a small drugstore. Most of the women operate from home or on the streets. The majority of women, nineteen out of twenty-four, were Catholics, four were evangelicals and one did not practice any religion. Except for four women who did not complete primary education, all women had received some form of education, ranging from primary school (seven) to university (six, of whom three did not finish their studies). A large majority of women (nineteen out of twenty-

four) were married at the time of the interviews. Of the others, two were living together, two were divorced and one was widowed.

## **Methodology**

The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews; structured questionnaires to assess actual knowledge of HIV/AIDS; participatory observation as a volunteer of a local HIV/AIDS organization; and informal conversations with local men and women, doctors and others. The in-depth interviews were done with a topic list, which was applied rather flexibly due to the sensitive nature of several questions. For reasons of privacy, all answers have been anonymised; the women have been given pseudonyms.

The questionnaires assessing knowledge were filled out by the women in the safety of their homes, because the first interviews showed that some women felt uncomfortable in answering the questions with the researcher present. After a few times, the researcher decided to leave the questionnaires with the respondents, with the verbal instruction that they should not regard it as an exam and thus refrain from looking up the 'right' answers or asking someone else.

## **HIV/AIDS knowledge and risk perception**

Analysis of the questionnaire data showed that in general, the women had good knowledge of HIV/AIDS. A large majority could correctly identify the most important ways of transmission of the virus, i.e., through blood, semen and vaginal fluids. There was slightly less knowledge of HIV transmission through unsafe blood transfusions and from a mother to her (unborn) child. The five women who did not correctly identify blood, vaginal fluids and semen as important carriers of HIV, also answered other knowledge-related questions incorrectly. Two of these women did not receive any education, two had only primary education and one secondary education.

With regards to personal risks of becoming infected with HIV, only one or two correctly identified heterosexual men and women as being potentially at risk of infection. The women mentioned female sex workers, men who have sex with men, lesbians and drug users as groups they most associate with HIV and AIDS. These findings suggest that they do not see themselves as a group at particular risk of infection. This is verified by the qualitative data. Most women trust their partners and do not believe they can become infected with HIV. For instance Gloria, a 64-year-old woman who sells sodas, crisps and cookies from her home, does not consider herself to be at risk.

*My husband and I, we have only been with each other. Why would we be at risk of getting such a disease? Only if you behave in the same way as young people, you will run the risk of contagion. I don't, I feel safe and secure that I cannot become infected. There is no reason to protect myself.*

## **Young people's vulnerability to HIV and the media**

During the in-depth interviews, the women mainly mentioned young people and gay men as people with high-risk behaviours. Aforementioned Maria strongly disapproves of the behaviour of modern-day young people, who are having one love affair after the other and are not committed to start a long-term relationship:

*According to me the problem is that young people, especially young people, are not conscious anymore about their own behaviour. The problem is that they no take any responsibility. They have many different sexual relations and do not consider that a problem. Why don't they just seek a good partner and stay with that person? Like we did when I was younger.*

Stefania (50) thinks that young people nowadays are more licentious (immoral, indecent) than before.

*For me, freedom means that you are free to do something and that you know and accept the consequences of that act. It's licentiousness when you enjoy the freedom without considering the consequences. For instance, a mother can grant her daughter the freedom to go out, but if the daughter is going out without asking, without contacting her mother, if she is just going and not saying anything to her... then she is being licentious and there lies a danger here.*

Forty-two year old Belén, who runs a small pizzeria from her home, is one of the women who believe that it is mainly the fault of the media that young people have become more licentious than in the old days.

*Nowadays, they show those soaps and programmes on television continuously, in which people have sexual relations. Everything is shown quite clearly. Women and men having sexual relations with different people, cheating each other, having a lot of freedom to do things like that. According to me young people are adopting all these ideas and are starting to behave similarly.*

The majority of women agree with Belén that the media impact on young people's behaviour negatively. Alba, a taco vendor, is one of the exceptions. She mainly sees advantages of the media promoting new models of behaviour.

*I think that the relationships that people have these days have changed. I believe it is through the influence of the media. There are many Western programmes and soaps on TV that people watch. They take over these ideas. As a result, girls do no longer accept a man's right to infidelity, whilst a woman is not allowed to cheat. They better stand up for themselves and do no longer tolerate cheating. They more often leave their husband when they find out that he is cheating. That is why nowadays women are more equal to men in their sexual relationships.*

#### **Men who have sex with men and the church**

The other group perceived to be at risk of HIV infection because of high-risk behaviours are men who have sex with men. Lorena Esperanza (aged 28) believes that they are the main group at risk. Again, her quote is another example of the low risk perception of the women in general:

*According to me, it's mainly men who have sex with men who are in danger. They spread illnesses like HIV/AIDS. Ordinary women like me, we are far away from that. We do not need to worry about it.*

According to the ideology of the Catholic Church, heterosexuality is the norm and homosexual behaviour is considered a sin. Many women thus speak disapprovingly of men who have sex with men. An example is Mercedes, a Catholic widow who sells clothes from a stall outside her home.

*I must say that in the old days there was not so much 'stuff' going on as nowadays. In the past, girls coupled with boys, but now you also see other things. I mean, same-sex couples. It's scandalous according to me. No, I do not like that, I cannot approve of it. People nowadays take a lot of liberties.*

Sixty-four year old Gloria even believes that homosexuality cannot exist among religious people.

*People who believe in God will not have sexual contact with someone of the same sex. Only non-believers, who do not put any faith in the Catholic Church, would do things like that.*

A minority of the women, five, stand out in their criticism of the Catholic Church's influence on sexual and reproductive health. One of them is Catholic herself, three are evangelicals and one is not religious. Four of them went to university. The Catholic woman, 46-year-old Juana, studied literature and owns a small second-hand bookshop. Among others, she disputes the resistance of the church against condom use:

*The Catholic Church opposes the use of condoms. They are of the opinion that a pregnancy should be a natural affair and that it should not be prevented in this way. Because of that they do not take into account or even deny that HIV/AIDS may also endanger the health of people.*

As we have seen, the majority of women do not consider themselves at risk of infection, mainly because they associate HIV infection with 'high-risk groups' such as young people, men who have sex with men and sex workers. Their perceptions are shaped by cultural norms about sexuality in Nicaragua, for instance the view that homosexuality is a sin and the value attached to virginity of unmarried girls and women. The ideal of virginity and sexual purity is stressed in the tradition of *marianismo*, a concept strongly related to *machismo* that promotes modest and chaste behaviour of women. Most of the women disapprove of sexual activity of unmarried girls and they consider their own sexual behaviour as falling within the sexual norms. How could they become infected with HIV if they do 'nothing wrong'?

### **The culture of silence**

Another important factor that enhances women's susceptibility to HIV infection is the *culture of silence*<sup>1</sup> and the taboos around discussing sexuality. As a result of these taboos, women refrain from talking to their partners about condom use, unfaithfulness, their HIV status or taking an HIV test. The cultural norms prescribe them to remain silent about sexual issues and leave all initiatives in the field of sexuality in the hands of men. In the words of 55-year-old Mrs Rodriguez:

*Women must pretend that they do not know anything about sex. It's the men who take the initiative. They know how to do it and they have the experience. A Nicaraguan man will beat you up if you do talk about it. If a woman shows that she is already experienced [in sexual matters], men will think that she is a slut. So, she will not do that. My husband decides when we have sex and how it is happening. I don't have much say in that.*

A majority of women say that it is impossible for them to talk about sexuality with their husbands. Even if they do discuss sexual issues, they will feel uncomfortable and ashamed, as Juana (46) confesses.

*Some time ago I wanted to start a conversation about using condoms, because I don't want to become pregnant anymore, but I was afraid that he would not like condoms. So I do not talk about it. We have also never discussed HIV/AIDS. It would perhaps be a good thing for both of us to do a test, but I am afraid to address that topic. It would be odd if I would suddenly start talking about it.*

The passive role of women in sexual affairs is also echoed by HIV education campaigns, which invariably focus on men. In the words of Janet, a female HIV/AIDS educator:

*In our opinion it's the men who must change their behaviours. They sleep around with different women and refuse to use condoms. Their women stay at home, unsuspecting, and become victims of the behaviour of their husbands. The men must take the initiative to use condoms, also when they are cheating; if the woman asks for it, it will not help.*

Another reason why women refrain from discussing HIV-related themes is fear of unreceptive or even aggressive responses from their husbands. Asking one's husband to start using condoms can be seen as insulting, because it contradicts the gender role of responsible husband a man may have adopted. Men in

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<sup>1</sup> R.G. Gupta, *Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS: The What, the Why, and the How*. International Centre for Research on Women, 2000

Nicaragua have to deal with opposing gender discourses in society, which prescribe them to be a good husband and father on the one hand and a *mujeriego* (womanizer) on the other hand. For many women, it means that they know that men in general will chase other women, but that they will have to trust their own husbands.

Alba (26) is one of the few women who say that talking about sex with their partner is unproblematic. She also believes that it is very important to talk about faithfulness and the dangers of HIV in a relationship.

*It is not really a problem for me. We can easily talk about sexuality. We also discuss what we expect from each other during sex and what we like. We also talked about the dangers of HIV/AIDS and we both took an HIV test. I trust my partner that he does not sleep with other women. We joke about sex, there is nothing to be secretive about. It is also very important to talk about it I think.*

Alba is one of the younger women interviewed and she is highly educated. This probably explains her openness in discussing sexual issues with her partner. A majority of women are showing some ambiguity when it comes to openly discussing sex. Many women find it difficult to give sexual education to their children. According to Stefania, sex education in schools is important, but she also is afraid that it will lead to early sexual initiation.

*I do believe that sex education is important. But I am a little bit in doubt. On the one hand it is important that people know about the problem of HIV/AIDS. But on the other hand children discover quite early what sexuality is, and they will also start having sexual contacts earlier. So, I do not know very well what to think of it. Their sexuality will be awakened in this manner at an early stage. They will want to find out how it is, what it is; they will start experimenting.*

Many women feel they are caught between more openness on sexual issues in society on the one hand and the culture of silence they grew up with on the other. Forty-two year old Belén, who finds it difficult to educate her 19-year-old son Noel about sex, says:

*Talking about sexuality is still a taboo, however it is becoming lesser so. I find it in itself a good thing that people talk about it more openly and that more information about it is given. I would like to prepare my son for it, but I am not used to talk about things like this, the way I was brought up. It makes it difficult for me.*

Margarita (38), a fruit juice vendor, agrees that there is more openness to discuss sexual issues, but she also sees the boundaries of that development.

*I think that in the time in which we are now living, it is quite a bit easier to talk about this kind of topics, sexuality and HIV/AIDS for instance. But sometimes they do not want to talk about it. If women talk about sexuality, they can be seen as sluts. There is more liberty these days, but there are still many women who do not want to touch this topic. Women who are living with HIV also are afraid to talk about their status, because they fear being rejected by others.*

Finally, in their sexual relations with men, most women seem to consider sex as something which is important for the men, not for themselves, as Victoria (35) expresses:

*For men sex is very important; I believe that I must just do it and not think about it too much.*

Most women want their partners to feel satisfied. Some women even fear that their partners will look for another woman if they are dissatisfied with the sexual relation. An example is Maria, who lives together with her friend, a doctor, and has no children. She says:

*When my partner and I have sex, it is most important to make sure that he is satisfied. It is for him. I think I just let it happen. I accept it, the way it is going, and I want him to feel good when he is with me. If that is not the case, he might look for a woman who better suits him.*

Summarizing, the sexual behavioural norms that prescribe that women remain passive in sexual relations can seriously hamper them in discussing sexual issues with their partners, including how to protect themselves against HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Even if they have sufficient knowledge about HIV, they will not talk about it with their husband, fearing that they will be met with opposition and aggression. The behavioural codes in Nicaraguan society lay down that a man should be knowledgeable in sexual affairs and a woman should remain passive and trust her husband that he will not bring the couple in danger.

### **Condom use and discussing faithfulness**

The ability or disability to negotiate condom use and discuss infidelity in the relationship is another important factor that impacts on the vulnerability of women to HIV infection. Very few of the women actually use condoms. According to Margarita, women know of the dangers of HIV/AIDS, but will never talk about it with their husbands directly, or request condom use because they know that would be insulting.

*The husband would think that either she does not trust him or that she sleeps with other people herself. He would be suspicious. Women sometimes share that they want to use condoms, but with the excuse that they do not want to become pregnant. That is probably true, but they also want to protect themselves against dangers like HIV/AIDS, because they may suspect their husbands are cheating. There is no way they can tell that to their husbands.*

Claudia (36), who repairs and sells clothes, suggests that asking for condom use is related to machismo: according to her, the honour of men and their self-worth are at stake.

*Nicaraguan men are very macho; I think that in many families, the husband prohibits the woman to use a condom. He says: "Why would you want to use protection, since you are with me? Why would that be necessary?" I believe most HIV infections take place this way. Because a man will not allow a woman to use condoms. Men do not like condoms, and women cannot force their husbands. It is an insult if a woman asks for a condom. It affects his self-esteem and his virility too. It is a very large insult.*

Another reason for non-condom use according to many women is that men do not like to use condoms because they diminish their sexual pleasure, as Mrs Rosaria (39) states:

*Perhaps 10 out of 100 men use condoms I believe. Men do not want to protect themselves. They think that they will have less pleasure if they use a condom. That is why my husband also would not like it. It's the problem with men here, they only care for their own pleasure and not for the welfare of their own wives.*

A final reason is that women would feel very uncomfortable if they had to buy condoms in the store, as Magdalena (34) explains:

*The woman almost never does this, because she might be seen as a slut, a person who sleeps around. People would be surprised if a woman would pay for a condom at the cash register. No, as a woman you cannot really do that. I would truly feel ashamed if I would buy a condom.*

One of the women who suspects that her partner is cheating on her is 29-year-old Flor de Maria, who lives together with her boy-friend, a doctor. She is afraid to discuss the topic with her boy-friend, but she did talk about it with some friends and her brother – who were not really supportive.

*I don't know, I do not dare to talk about it with my partner. I am afraid that he will not take it well or become angry. I do not trust him that much. But what can I do? I don't want him to leave me. Nevertheless, I am afraid that he could infect me. But if I would ask him to use condoms, I think he would be very angry. My brother says that I must let it go, 'men are like this, there is nothing you can do', he says, 'they need their little pleasures'. People around me think that I should forgive him and just accept the situation.*

## **Unequal gender relations**

As we have seen, the low risk perception of women; the taboos on talking about sex and sexuality; the norms prescribing women to be passive and ignorant in sexual matters and men to be active and knowledgeable; and the perceived right of men to extramarital sex, all impact on women's vulnerability to HIV infection. Their vulnerability is also influenced by the machismo culture, which makes it difficult for women to discuss condom use and infidelity in their relationships.

For many married women and women in steady relationships, it is hard to deal with the macho behaviour of their partners. They are responsible for the day-to-day management of their household and they often have financial problems. Even though more and more Nicaraguan women are working, as a result of the difficult economic situation and high unemployment among men, this economic emancipation of women has not led to more equal gender relations in the family. Women are still fully responsible for taking care of the house and the children and they often complain about their 'lazy' husbands, like Juana explains:

*You know what it is, almost all women are working these days. But they also must do everything at home. The men do not feel obliged to help. Men work as well, but when they come home from work, they do nothing anymore. They will just sit and loiter, watch a movie and wait till dinner is ready. The women hardly relax, they cannot sit quietly for even a few seconds.*

Mrs Rosaria complains about men hanging around and getting drunk while women have to do all the work.

*Sometimes I think that women here do more than men. Presently many women work and they also care for their children and do everything in the house. They are always busy, while the men hang around with friends on the streets and drink rum. They spend the money they earn and then come home drunk.*

The socialization and upbringing of boys and girls in the family plays a role in the construction of masculinity and femininity in society. Women are aware of their own role in this regard, as the following quote by Reynalda shows. Reynalda (36) has five brothers and vividly remembers the differences in how she and her brothers were brought up. Even though she realises it is unfair, she brings up her children in the same way.

*I had to do the house-keeping together with my mother. My brothers did not help us at all. They played in the streets, went to school. I was never allowed to go with them, because I had to wipe the house, buy food on the market, etc. Sometimes, when I was in the garden to hang out the laundry, my father needed something from the kitchen. Then he would call me to take it and bring it to him, whilst I had to come from quite far and my brother sat next to him at the table. I found that quite unfair at times. Yet, and perhaps this sounds odd, I bring up my children in approximately the same way. I am used to it this way and everybody around me is doing the same.*

Except for differences in doing household chores, people also treat their sons and daughters differently when it comes to independence and going out. Girls are perceived to be more vulnerable; they need to be protected and it is considered more appropriate for a girl or woman to be accompanied by her husband or a relative when she is going somewhere. A large majority of women share this public opinion, which Mercedes phrases as follows:

*In my opinion, girls and boys should not have the same rights. There should be some differences. For instance, I only have one son. But if I would also have a daughter, I would not give her the same rights as my son. Regarding going out for instance, my daughter would always have to ask me permission to go out, she would have to be back at a certain time and would always be accompanied by other people, for instance her boy-friend or relatives. My son would not need to do all that.*

The unequal gender relations in Nicaraguan society are reflected in the lack of respect that men often show to women. According to Claudia, a 36-year-old divorcee, this is due to a lack of good upbringing. She has a 10-year old son, José.

*I always teach my son to treat women respectfully. Any type of women. Prostitutes, lesbians, they are all women and must be treated with respect. Boys must learn that from their parents. The parents must teach them that, but in many households this does not happen. The father wants his son to become a 'real' boy and a strong man, who can pick up any woman.*

### **Machismo according to the women**

According to many women, machismo is still shaping unequal gender relations in Nicaragua. They describe the concept of machismo using phrases like 'disregarding a woman's opinion', 'denying women the right to take important decisions', 'desiring to control a woman' and 'being in power'. In the words of Belén, a macho man is 'an immature person', someone who is selfish and not capable of sharing the decision-making in a relationship.

*It means that men only believe in their own opinions, and that they alone have the right to raise their sons, or receive attention from their sons; they think they are the only ones that take decisions. That the woman is there for his needs only, and nothing more. And they do not take the opinions of women seriously. They ought to do that. Decisions should be taken together by the man and the woman. Not only by the man. They both have opinions and there should be space for both to express them.*

Victoria, who sells flowers from her home, describes machismo as men being in control of women, wanting to rule them.

*Men in Nicaragua want to rule, they want to 'manejar' [drive]. They want to control the women and have the power in their hands. The men think that they should decide about everything, for instance about how to spend money within the household. Even if the woman earns her own money, the man often decides what to do with it. The man wants to have the 'voz cantante', the leading voice. He decides what happens and what not. That is machismo according to me.*

Another aspect of machismo named by many women is the right that men believe to have to engage in multiple sexual partnerships. Guilia (38) believes that this particular type of macho behaviour is an age-old tradition in Nicaragua. She also thinks that macho men do not want their wife to develop herself, because they believe her role is restricted to taking care of the family and the house.

*I think that it [the macho behaviour] comes from the grandparents, or how do you say that, of the ancestors. The man thinks that he has the right to do things differently than his woman; he thinks he has more rights than his wife. He can sleep with other women, but she cannot sleep with other men, the men are 'mujeriegos' but the women cannot act in the same way. They also have this idea that the husband should work and his wife should remain a housewife. Those are the traditional views. The man has specific rights that the woman has not. You will find it in many different things. I do not agree with this. These men for instance discourage their women to start a professional career. They do not want them to develop themselves any further. It is the duty of the woman to take care of the children, the family and the house, and nothing else, they believe.*

## **Domestic violence**

A combination of factors such as the ideology of machismo, the high unemployment rates among men and a lack of attention paid by the government to the problem, has led to a high level of domestic violence in Nicaragua. Many women expressed clear opinions about domestic violence and how it is related to unequal gender relations, as for instance Victoria recognizes. According to her the situation is exacerbated by the high rate of alcohol abuse in Nicaragua.

*Men think that they can dominate women. They think they are more important than women, and they feel their needs are more important than the needs of women. That is why there is so much domestic and sexual violence here. If men have the feeling of losing control, they become aggressive. Sometimes they cannot cope with the situation that a woman has taken too much freedom for herself. Or they are frustrated because they have no jobs and have nothing to do the whole day. Then they will drink alcohol and things are getting worse. Alcohol is a big problem in Nicaragua; the men drink a lot. Although they are religious, they do everything God has forbidden.*

It is difficult to stop the violence or leave a violent relationship, the women explain. Victoria thinks that part of that is due to the lack of police action.

*The police does not do anything you know, they do not respond when a woman is being beaten, they just let it happen. Therefore, men may think: Oh, if we are not being punished at all, we can keep on doing it...*

Magdalena, aged 34, believes that it is the economic and/or emotional dependency of women that makes it difficult for them to leave. Other reasons according to her might be that women have a low self-esteem, or that they think they deserve to be punished.

*I think women are too dependent on men, in different aspects, and that is why they do not dare to leave them or are unable to do that. They are often financially dependent on the man, they are afraid that their husbands will leave them if they go against them. She can also be attached to him too much emotionally. She thinks that, despite everything, he really loves her and that she loves him. But women should never tolerate violence. Perhaps they have a low self-esteem. Or they think they do not have the right to go against their husbands or that they have deserved the violence.*

Claudia, who divorced her husband two years ago because he was battering her, believes it is also women's responsibility to stop the violence:

*There is a lot of domestic violence in Nicaragua, but I think that we women should not tolerate it. We have a responsibility there too. Many women do not have the character to say 'no'. Men want to dominate and they think that women cannot lead, manage. They think that women are weak and*

*fragile. But women often behave like that. They should not tolerate the domination, but revolt. Women are as responsible as men.*

Two of the women, Stefania (50) and Mrs Martinez (34) confess during the interviews that they are experiencing domestic violence. Stefania's husband Marvin, a construction worker, sometimes hits her when he is drunk.

*My husband is sometimes aggressive when he is drunk. He comes home and I know that he is drunk. He hits me sometimes if he is displeased with me. I do not quite understand why he does it; it looks like he is not himself. He is unhappy I think and this is the way he shows it.*

Also Mrs Martinez' husband becomes violent if he has consumed a lot of alcohol. Her husband is unemployed, bored and often drunk. She would like to leave him, but is afraid she cannot take care of herself. She also confesses that she is too afraid to refuse him sex when he is drunk, because she fears that he will force her to have sex with him against her will.

*My husband does not treat me well. I know that, but it is difficult to stop it. His brother tells him to quit doing it, but he does not listen. I am too afraid to leave him, what will people think of me? I am not able to have a normal family. This situation is not good for me but if I go away... I don't know, it will be more difficult I think. How can I take care of myself?*

*Sometimes he comes home late in the evening when I am already asleep. Then he wants to have sex with me, while I would just like to sleep. I do not dare to refuse him. I am afraid for his response, so I give in. If he has drunk a lot, he is quite aggressive and I am afraid that he will force himself on me.*

## **Feeling free and taking decisions**

The interviews showed that many women feel repressed in doing what they want, because their partner is controlling their movements or denying them the right to jointly take household decisions. The majority of the women interviewed describe their partners as being extremely jealous and possessive. They do not allow their wife or girl-friend to talk to other men or go out with their female friends. Even though the women dislike this behaviour, most have learned to accept it. Alba is one of the few exceptions. Enrique, the man she lives with, is possessive too, but she still goes out with her friends because she needs to feel free once in a while. Mercedes (41) on the other hand, whose husband died three years ago, felt compelled to accept the situation.

*I would never go to a party without him, never. He would not approve of that. My husband would be jealous and think that I would talk and dance with other men. Earlier I really disliked that. I needed to have my own life, more independent of my husband. I felt stifled by him. But after a while I reconciled myself with it. I knew he would not change anyway. Sometimes, when we went out together and he saw me looking at another man, he enraged himself once we were home and told me not to do that again. One time he even began to yell at me in the middle of the bar because he was jealous. He even wanted to attack that man.*

In line with the tradition of machismo, men dominate decisions on for instance how to raise the children or how to spend the family income. Again, fear of aggression may prohibit a woman to go against her partner's opinions, as Mrs Rodriguez relates. She is a 55-year-old vendor of fruit and vegetable shakes who is married to a man who is currently unemployed. She confesses that her husband Guillermo sometimes is violent.

*Sometimes we have little money to spend, and I believe that we should save, or spend money differently than my husband wants. He wants to buy a TV, while we sometimes do not even have enough money to buy good clothes for our daughter. Yet he enforces his will on me. I don't know how I can convince him. I am also afraid of his aggressive attitude if I would go against him.*

## **Economic independence**

The women supported by LEON 2000 all have experienced a change in their family situation as a result of the income derived from their small businesses. This new situation, they agree, has led to more independence, freedom and space in their relationship. However, as Carmen's story shows, women spend the income from their business mainly for family expenditures, while most men keep their income for themselves. Carmen, the bookseller, is married with a bartender and has two teenage children.

*All the money I earn with my shop I spent on the children. They should go to school and have enough food. My husband also earns money, but I rarely see any of it. He spends it on alcohol or who knows, on other things. We argue about that a lot. Why should I pay for everything the family needs and can he do what he wants with his money?*

One of the research questions was whether the newly found economic independence of the women has impacted on the gender relations they experience. Mrs Montalvan, a 29-year-old pedicure and manicure, thinks that the fact that she is now working has had a positive impact on her relationship with her husband. Even though she has less clients than she would have liked, she is able to take care of herself now and really enjoys that.

*Having my own business mainly has positive influences. It gives me more freedom to do what I want. I can defend myself better against my husband. My husband is sometimes rather bossy. He wants to take care of me and tell me how to do things. He means it well, but I would rather prefer to care for myself. Now I feel stronger than before.*

Juana (46) who started her bookshop about four years ago, believes that starting a business has made her relationship more equal.

*According to me, women these days are more independent from men. When I was not working, the relationship between me and my husband was much different. I was at home all the time and did nothing. I had no work. Now my husband and I both earn money and that is better for me. It seems, you know, more equal this way.*

Juana also believes that she has more influence now in the relationship, also when it comes to decisions about how to spend the family income. She is married to a taxi driver and has two grown-up children.

*Since I work, my husband and I take more decisions together about how we spend our money. Before, I did not earn anything, so I did not have much say about it. Now it feels more like we do it together. Nowadays I will not give in that fast if he wants something while I want something else. I feel like I am better able to decide about my own life now.*

Although all women share that they are pleased with the new independence the business has brought them, there may also be negative outcomes, as Mrs Hernandez (47) relates. Her husband only occasionally works as a handyman and her income from selling soup and tacos from her home has to provide for a family of six.

*I quarrel a lot with my husband about money. Sometimes more than before, I think. Even though he is glad that I also earn some money, he finds it difficult to cope with. He considers himself a bad spouse, because he cannot provide for us. He would like to take care of me and the family, but our financial situation is bad. We both have to work to make ends meet and he finds that difficult to accept.*

## Conclusions and recommendations

The low risk perception of women; the taboos on talking about sex and sexuality; the norms prescribing women to be passive and ignorant in sexual matters and men to be active and knowledgeable; and aspects of the machismo culture, including men's domination over women, domestic violence and men's perceived right to extramarital sex, all impact on women's vulnerability to HIV infection.

Although the interviewed women in general had a reasonably good knowledge about the ways of transmission and the concept of HIV as a serious condition, most women never took an HIV test nor asked their partner whether he had ever taken one. Condom use was very rare. An important factor that increases the vulnerability of the interviewed women to HIV infection is that they do not consider themselves at risk. They mainly associate HIV and AIDS with high-risk behaviours of young people, sex workers or men who have sex with men; behaviours that they see as dangerous and problematical. Their perceptions are shaped by cultural norms about sexuality in Nicaragua, for instance the view that homosexuality is a sin and the value attached to virginity and sexual purity of unmarried girls and women. HIV infection is seen by the women as something that happens to others, which explains why they do not consider protection necessary.

Another important factor that enhances women's susceptibility to HIV infection is the *culture of silence* and the taboos around discussing sexuality in Nicaragua. As a result of these taboos, women refrain from talking to their partners about condoms, infidelity, and HIV. The behavioural codes in Nicaraguan society prescribe that a man should be knowledgeable in sexual affairs and a woman should remain ignorant and passive; she should simply trust her husband to decide what is best for them. These sexual behavioural norms can seriously hamper women in discussing sexual issues with their partners, including how to protect themselves against HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Their vulnerability is also influenced by the ideology of machismo, which makes it difficult for women to discuss condom use and infidelity in their relationships. Even if they have sufficient knowledge about HIV, they will not talk about it with their husband, fearing that they will be met with opposition and aggression. Men's domination over women sanctioned by the machismo culture can lead to domestic violence, especially in situations of excessive use of alcohol. Another aspect of machismo mentioned by the women is men's perceived right to extramarital sex, which directly impacts on women's vulnerability to HIV infection.

According to the literature, educational and economic empowerment are factors that can decrease women's vulnerability to HIV infection.<sup>2</sup> The findings of this research confirm that women with higher education are better able to protect themselves against HIV. Most of the women who had a critical attitude to the Catholic Church's influence on sexual and reproductive health matters, had university education. The respondents who went to university were more likely to take an HIV test and to ask their partner whether he knows his HIV status than the women with less education.

The link between greater economic independence and vulnerability to HIV is also confirmed by this research. The literature suggests that economically dependent women are for instance less able to negotiate about safer sex or to leave a risky or violent relationship. This findings show that starting their own business has positively impacted on the self-esteem of the women and their feelings of equality between them and their male partners. Since they have started their small businesses, the women of León have felt more independent and better in control of their own life. Decisions about how to spend the family income

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<sup>2</sup> A. Ehrhardt, S. Sawires, T. McGovern, D. Peacock & M. Weston, Gender, empowerment, and health: What is it? How does it work? *AIDS*, 51(3): 96-105

are taken in unison more often. These indications of more equality in the relationship suggest a better position of women in negotiating condom use or discussing infidelity. However, economic independence can also lead to more conflicts in relationships, which may narrow down the space for safer sex negotiations. The findings also suggest that the economic independence of women is of relative significance only. Often, men still decide about how to spend the household income or they let their wives pay for all household expenditures while they keep their own earnings for pocket money.

Even though educational and economic independence of women can contribute to more equal gender relations and more power for women to discuss safer sex, it is only one of many factors. Of prime importance is the role machismo plays in Nicaraguan society, a role that needs to be carefully reviewed. As long as traditional roles and characteristics of men and women are not questioned, it will remain difficult for women to make rational and responsible choices to protect their sexual health.

### **Recommendations**

Within HIV prevention programmes there should be more emphasis on starting a debate on multiple sexual partnerships, rather than promoting condom use in every sexual relation men have, which is now the practice. There should also be more attention to the importance of HIV testing for both men and women. Prevention campaigns should stress that everybody is potentially at risk of HIV infection; not just young people or people with lifestyles that do not subscribe to traditional norms. In this regard it is of prime importance to stress that women have the right to protect themselves against HIV infection, without being called a 'slut' or a 'whore'. More attention should be paid to a general change in attitudes of men with regard to sexual behaviour and condom use. Protecting one's own sexual health as well as the sexual health of one's sex partner should become more important than a man's masculinity and virility.

The fight against domestic violence and unequal power relations should be prominently integrated in HIV prevention programmes, to give women more freedom in starting discussions on condom use or unfaithfulness within their relationships. Several aspects of machismo, such as 'men's right to cheat' and their dominant attitude regarding decision-making should also be addressed in prevention programmes. Perceptions about gender that portray women as subordinate, vulnerable and dependent, and men as strong and independent, could be discussed in group discussions in which both men and women participate.

Finally, with regard to STOP AIDS NOW!'s project 'Integrating HIV/AIDS within microfinance', the most important recommendation is that stakeholders should not assume too easily that economic empowerment of women will automatically increase negotiating power of women with regard to safer sex, or make them leave risky or violent relationships. Even though the greater economic independence of the women supported by LEON 2000 has led to a noticeable shift in the power balance, their choices are still being restricted by cultural factors such as the ideology of machismo and the existing sexual norms in Nicaraguan society.