

ABSTRACT

Young trans femme adolescents and young trans women (YTW) bear a disproportionate burden of HIV. Although previous models of HIV intervention have emphasized personal responsibility and mitigating “risky behaviors”, research has called for strength-based, community-centered approaches to mitigating HIV risk. 17 interviews were carried out with young trans women with Harvard, Universidad Peruano Cayetano Heredia, and Fémimas, the largest transgender organization in Peru. It was found that themes of resiliency such as eagerness to learn, mutual aid and identification of abusive dynamics are impeded by transphobic stigma which deny trans women education, material resources and domestic violence reporting. Solidarity and resistance are tools by which trans women can combat societal stigma and support one another, allowing them their resilient actions to result in positive health outcomes.

20 subsequent interviews will be carried out with trans women associated with Fémimas and ball houses (two high-yield loci of community support) to understand the themes of solidarity and resistance, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 and HIV. These will be done throughout 2022 after successful IRB approval May 2022.

3 material support projects were carried out, focusing on uplifting the themes of resiliency demonstrated in the secondary data analysis carried out by Fémimas.

BACKGROUND

Transgender women are at high risk for HIV infection.

- In Peru, HIV prevalence rates are 29.8%-48.8%¹⁻³ compared with 0.3% in the general population.⁴
- There is a sharp increase in HIV prevalence in TW at age 25, which demonstrates the unmet needs of trans children and young adults.

Fémimas is the largest transgender community organization in Peru.

- Became a COVID-19 resource center
- Spoke out against the gendered violence experienced by trans people when the Peruvian government instituted social distancing measures which restricted movement outside of the house by gender
- Protested the government restriction of identification document name changes
- Delivered groceries to over 200 trans people during COVID-19
- Carry out 2 weekly social spaces for young and elder transgender people
- Provide HIV and STI testing to 16-24 trans girls and women, in partnership with UPCH and Harvard — healthcare for trans women by trans women

Research has called for TW HIV care to build on community strengths⁸⁻¹⁰, as opposed to continuing Western personal responsibility models and risk-based language.

OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Fémimas HIV risks and resiliencies interviews and community-based analysis

Objective 2: Solidarity, resistance and resilience interviews within the context of art, activism, and mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic

Objective 3: Material support for resiliency, health-promoting projects

METHODS

Overall mythology: guided by critical ethnography (to address sociopolitical reality and “unsettle” oppression), syndemics (the study of co-occurring epidemics which interact) and *testimonios* (justice-oriented narrative inquiries with roots in Latin America)

Objective 1: Fémimas HIV risks and resiliencies interviews and community-based analysis

- From January to March of 2022, I read and translated 17 interviews of trans adolescents and young trans women. I attended weekly meetings at Fémimas, and connected themes of HIV risks (childhood sexual assault) and HIV resiliencies (saying no to condomless sex in sex work) present in both the interviews and social discussions of personal experiences. I discussed these frameworks two trans women recruiting and working on HIV testing of trans youth at Fémimas, the director of Fémimas, trans madres and padres of various ball houses, and my research team at UPCH, Harvard and UCLA.

Objective 2: Solidarity, resistance and resilience interviews within the context of art, activism, and mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic

- After receiving IRB approval in May 2022, 20 testimonios will be carried out with transgender people engaged with transgender mutual aid in Lima. These conversations will inquire into COVID-19 related inequities, vulnerabilities and resiliencies, including the contributions of art, activism and mutual aid.

Objective 3: Material support for resiliency, health-promoting projects

- Funding (\$6000) from United Health Foundation / National Medical Fellowships secured by the author will be utilized to support micro-grants for transgender people in Lima. Applications rolling for 6 months, selected with community leaders such as Fémimas and ball house mothers. Examples of small grants include: community connectedness (meal stipends, community events, local travel expenses to congregate), YTW autonomy (youth-led projects), pride in one’s gender and ethnic / racial identity (affirming private and public artwork, participating in a meaningful way within larger pride celebrations), spirituality and hope for the future (faith-based gatherings)



Fémimas representation during trans day of visibility. Trans women called for government protections and particularly increased access to government ID name changes to safely work and go to school.

RESULTS

Interviews provided by Fémimas provided insight into the resiliencies of young trans women. Majority of participants (mean age 21, 66.7%) migrated to Lima from the Amazon, and 85.7% reported sex work. Eight themes of resilience emerged: identification and procurement of gender affirmation needs, identification of abusive dynamics, desire for education and job skills, mutual aid and community solidarity, supportive relationships with family members, minimal and mindful substance use, personal HIV prevention, and hopes for the future. Narratives demonstrated how resilient actions (i.e. attending school) are impeded by transphobic stigma (i.e. family rejection) which imposes HIV risk (ie. loss of material support leading to educational attrition and survival sex work). Stigma was described as preventing access to supportive family, education, jobs, social support, gender affirmation, housing, safety from violence and disclosure of violence; all factors in HIV vulnerability. Narratives also spotlight Peruvian social transformations which reduce transphobic stigma (i.e., gender-affirming quinceanera). A conceptual model was created, representing resilience as arrows, and transphobic stigma as walls blocking and redirecting arrows from positive health outcomes. Transphobic stigma can “box” YTAW into HIV risk despite personal responsibility.

Quotes to illustrate themes:

Identification and procurement of gender affirmation needs

The interview sample demonstrated behaviors self-defined as feminine as young as 5-8 years old “I knew [I was *feminina*] when I was in kindergarten. I liked playing as a woman, becoming a woman, and dressing like a girl.” Activities included playing with dolls, playing house and having only female friends: “I liked to play— from a very young age— with everything that was for women...playing house, playing with dolls, playing jump ropes and everything that girls did”, and “my social circle has always been all women, always women”. Another stated “since I was 6, 7 years old I was already [feminine], when [my family] made me dance— and I danced well— I put on my mother’s heels and danced.” Another stated “since I was 5, 6, I already realized that I was [feminine], at 7, 8, [I was] already processing that I really knew who I was— that I was a woman”.

Desire for education and job skills

Many participants described being eager to learn. In the same sentence, participants stated that despite being eager to learn, their parents did not provide support due to their gender and / or sexual identity: “Well, school was beautiful, studying...it was beautiful...I didn’t care what people said to me. I wanted to learn more and more and more, but my father didn’t help me...so I left.”, and “I did very well at school...I was an intelligent boy, a very fast learner, and I was loved by all the teachers. But at that time I had family problems, because of my orientation”.

Identification of abusive dynamics

“There are daring people on the street, they beat you up, take your cell phone, your wallet, whatever. And another [problem] is those who change fees [to stand on a certain corner]. And that seems very strange to me, they threaten you, they want to hit you [if you don’t pay], I don’t know, it seems very strange to me.”

Mutual aid and community solidarity

“[My trans mother] is my support, sometimes she gives me [money] for my hormones, because she wants to see me happy. She told me ‘well, I want to see you happy...I am happy if you are happy’. She supports me with the hormones with what she can, she invites me to go out, I go to her house, she gives me advice, everything a mother does.”

Minimal and mindful substance use

“No, I don’t let off steam with a drink, and I don’t smoke.”

Safe sex literacy, testing and practices

“I use condoms for all my services. For oral I use condoms, anal I use condoms. I’m taking PREP, I go to my check-ups.”

Hope for the future

“I want to go back to my hometown, look at a couple of plots of land...places where I can have a business, or a house like that. I’ve always had in mind, since I was little, [that] I want to own a business in my town.”

Supportive family

“Of course I see [my father], we talk, I tell him about my life. Nowadays we have trust, conversations that, for me, is a grand achievement... I can tell him my things, I can tell him what happened to me, and that fills me with joy because I have someone to talk to, my best friend is my father.”

Using these findings from research carried out by Fémimas and my research team, material support projects which uplifted these themes were carried out. So far, the three projects have been carried out: a dinner for international women’s day with Fémimas, supporting a national trans masculine networking conference, and emergency funds for a young Afro-Peruvian trans member of ball. Future plans include a meeting with the trans leaders of ball, to plan 1-2 ballroom events, likely with the themes of HIV and / or transgender identity. This was due to feedback from the community, and a tradition of House of Prince to have a ball on December 1 in honor of AIDS awareness day.

CONCLUSIONS

Resilient thoughts and actions lead to deleterious health consequences due to transphobic stigma. Solidarity and resistance against stigma within a liberatory framework provide a path for resilient actions to lead to positive health outcomes. Extending material resources to grassroots trans organizations in Peru could serve as a novel and targeted HIV intervention.