



## INTERNATIONAL SERVICE MAKING CONNECTIONS

LINKING DEVELOPMENT WORKERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY



### connecting with . . . *Lucy Burghard*

October 2005

**“Hello stranger! Haven’t seen you around for awhile- abandoned us eh!? Come by tomorrow- let us know where you’re staying and we’ll drop by and pick you up in the morning!”**

Its 11pm on Thursday night in the downtown port area of Manacapuru. Lucia and Tania- two of the peer educators from the HIV/STI prevention project, are doing the rounds and are teasing Nilce, a sex worker who hasn’t been to the Project for the last couple of months. Dressed in coloured "SEE THIS CONDOM!" t-shirts (customised to give the tightest possible effect), and with their project bags stuffed with flip charts of disease photos and condoms for sale at virtual cost price (a packet of 3 for R\$1- 20p), the peer educators' task is clear, if not easy- motivation. Firstly they need to motivate the increasingly beer fuelled groups of blokes who are loitering around the pool tables and starting to gather around the girls near the dance floor, to stop for a moment and consider spending half the cost of a can of beer on a packet of condoms. And secondly, they try to cajole the girls working in the bars to listen to them as they explain a bit about the project and invite them to drop by for a free check-up in the morning.



Manacapuru isn’t huge- its urban population is approx 50,000 inhabitants, but after nearly 18 months here I am still taken aback by the numbers of girls who are selling sex in this area. We have over 450 clinic cards in the Project, with 35 new attendances since January, the youngest of whom was just 14. Nilce is typical:



she is a waitress in one of the bars popular with fishermen in the port area. At just 22, she is supporting two small children on a weekly salary of R\$30 (£6) the majority of which, R\$20 goes to pay for her hotel room in the square behind the bar. With just £2 a week for her family to live on, she relies on the additional income provided by clients from the bar where she works.

The goal of the project is not to take women like Nilce away from prostitution, but to minimise the risks of STI infection and transmission, especially of AIDS,

amongst them, their clients and the population in general. There are presently 26 known cases of HIV within the whole population of Manacapuru and the role of the peer educators is to try to prevent any more.

The next morning, Friday, is always hectic at the project. Usually everyone is tired from being out the night before (working or otherwise) and Lucia the sub-coordinator needs to be quick in confirming the vehicle and driver lent to us by our neighbours in the malaria section is still available and ready to go. Last night they noted 33 sex workers in the port area- five of whom were new and had just arrived from another, much smaller community down stream. Today they have a list of names and addresses of girls and women who have expressed interest in attending the project clinic. They have prioritised the 3 who have 'results to collect' (positive microscopy requiring treatment for gonorrhoea- confidential information since in a small town, rumours of infection of any kind could put pay to someone's career), and have noted all the addresses carefully- there is a very rapid turn over of hotel and rented rooms, with changes sometimes almost weekly due to fallouts over unpaid rents.



Friday morning clinics are a one stop for STI check-ups (a speculum exam, microscopy and blood tests for HIV and syphilis), smear testing, family planning (pill and injections), referrals to a gynaecologist when necessary and free condoms (six per person weekly) from the Ministry of Health. The clinic also offers treatment for infections based on 'syndromic management' - a flowchart approach to diagnostics where clinical resources are poor (as is the case here with no culture for gonorrhoea or diagnostics for chlamydia). Equally importantly, in the waiting area there are videos, safe

sex demonstrations and free coffee and biscuits. Kids are welcome and gossip is abundant. This week is fairly typical - 12 attendances, three of whom are new to the clinic, and a row initiated by me over the peer educators eating the majority of the biscuits. A good day's work that's continuing- tonight it's the turn of Eriane and Mirtes to be out and about down town.

**Lucy Burghard**  
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*Photos: Lucy in a balloon heart; peer educators in their new t-shirts; STI mural at the project office; peer educators Tania, Chris and Lucia shelter with a sex worker under a bar umbrella on a rainy night (all IS/Lucy Burghard).*



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