

# Chapter 1 Introduction

This manual is about implementing HIV/AIDS prevention programmes aimed at commercial sex workers (CSWs), their clients and sexual partners. The content is the result of our experiences in Nigeria which began in 1989. Our project worked extensively in Calabar and Ikom in Cross River State, and we expanded our intervention to include Port Harcourt, Rivers State in January, 1992. Over the course of our project, we have been able to reach approximately 2300 full- or part-time CSWs and 5000 clients in the three target locations. We have developed this manual with the hope that others will benefit from our experiences working with commercial sex workers. It can be used by anyone who wants to work with CSWs to reduce the threat of the AIDS epidemic, whether you have formal training in public health or not. We hope that you will be able to adapt and use what worked for us, and at the same time avoid some of the mistakes we made over the course of our project.

The work you are about to undertake will not be easy. Commercial sex workers can be a very difficult group. They have spent much of their lives stigmatized and exploited by others. They may not understand why you care about them, and will want to know what you stand to gain from the project. They may not want to let you in to their community, and may even be mean and insulting to you as you try to begin your work. We were chased from one hotel by a CSW who wanted us to leave because her girls "needed the vitamins and food [believed to be found in semen] and not condoms which will make them dry up." As one hotel manager we work with said: "This work is no bed of roses!" However, with patience, endurance, honesty, and dedication, you will find these women to be much like any other women you know. They are intelligent, warm, and caring, and the response you will get from them will be overwhelming. We wish you the best of luck as you begin this most rewarding work.

## Some Guiding Principles

As community health workers, our goal is to decrease deaths due to AIDS in Nigeria by helping commercial sex workers learn how they can protect themselves from this virus. Clients, too, need to be empowered to take action to avoid infection. Mostly, we try to encourage the use of condoms to prevent the transmission of the virus. However, when working with communities, this is not our only goal. Health education interventions can not only help people address a particular health problem that threatens their lives, but can also empower people to use their new-found skills to solve other



However, there is another side to their involvement, too. It is important for you to always remember that you do not "own" the project you work on, that the real owners of the project are the CSWs themselves. It is **their** project in **their** community. You, as a community worker, are only there to facilitate the process. For the project to be successful, they must be involved in all of the decision-making surrounding the project.

In summary, always remember:

- Treat CSWs as equals.
- Respect their ideas and be willing to learn from them.
- Learn to listen, for they have a story to tell.
- Share control of the project with them.
- Invite cooperation among all people touched by the project.
- Welcome criticism—it is the way to improvement.
- Make decisions jointly and consult the CSWs before any major decision.

