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Street Vendors Organising: The Case of the Women's Network (Red de Mujeres), Lima, Peru

Peru's capital city of Lima hosts a vibrant informal economy. At the heart of that informal economy are street vendors, who at present number more than 210,000³. Street vendors have occupied public space in central Lima since the colonial period, and the first recorded attempt to regulate street trade in Lima dates back to 1594⁴. For more than four centuries since then, street vendors have contributed to the local economy by providing affordable goods and services to local residents.

Street vending organisations also have a long history in Lima. At present, however, these organisations are struggling to maintain their membership levels and activities. In response to the challenge of maintaining their sustainability, some have directed their efforts toward building new organisational models in the form of networks and alliances to help overcome long-lasting problems in the sector.

One promising example of a new model is the Women's Network of Lima. Women represent two-thirds of all street vendors in Lima, and yet very few women hold leadership



The Women's Network of Street and Market Vendors (Lima, Peru) combats the under-representation of women in leadership positions within street vending organizations.

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³ All statistical data presented in this Briefing Note are derived from the Encuesta Nacional de Hogares (National Survey of Households) of 2006 unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Hernando de Soto, *The Other Path: The Economic Answer to Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 1989): 75.

positions in base-level associations of street vendors, and even fewer have reached the leadership ranks inside the federations. To combat the dramatic under-representation of women, the Women's Network of Street and Market Vendors of Lima, Peru (Red de Mujeres Trabajadores Ambulantes y Comerciantes de Mercados de Lima, Perú) was created on May 3, 2004. This Briefing Note describes the background, objectives, activities and achievements of the Women's Network as an example of better practice in the street trading sector.⁵

Background and Structure of the Women's Network

According to the International Labour Office, in 2007, informal employment represented 73.8% of overall employment among women in Peru.⁶ Among the many reasons for a high rate of informal employment among women is the difficulty working women face in finding adequate childcare for children too young for school. For Gloria Solórzano, Secretary of Women for the CUT (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores) and founding president of the Women's Network, the unavailability of childcare was enough to force her to leave a job in the formal sector, after which she adopted street vending as an occupation. She saw that although women vastly outnumbered men on the streets, men nearly always dominated



the organisations that claimed to represent her.

The realization that so many other women like her, most of whom also headed families, were subject to male leadership within street vending organisations led Solórzano and 11 other women vendors from various districts of Lima to form the Women's Network in 2004. "I didn't plan on being a leader, but as I saw the abuses of the authorities and the organisation leaders themselves, I decided to participate, to support, and to change the structure," said Solórzano in an interview with the Inter Press Service (IPS).⁷ "I said to

Gloria Solórzano, founding president of the Women's Network, asked herself: "If women are the majority of street vendors, why are we led by men?" The Network aims to strengthen the position of women within their own organisations and in the public sphere.

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Solórzano's vision for the Network was to place women in leadership positions within existing organisations, rather than to build a parallel organisation that would have its

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations presented in this Briefing Note are based on focus group sessions conducted by Lissette Aliaga Linares in November 2007 as part of the ILO In-Focus Initiative on the Informal Sector.

⁶ International Labour Office, "2008 Labour Overview: Latin America and the Caribbean," p. 20.

⁷ Maritza Asencios, "Perú: Trabajadoras forzadas a la informalidad." Inter Press Service website (<http://ipsnoticias.net/nota.asp?idnews=94011>), accessed 24 November 2009 (author's translation).



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own platform with regard to street vending issues.⁸ Given that many street vendors recently have been forced off the streets into precarious off-street markets, the Network also incorporates women market vendors who face problems similar to their counterparts in the streets. Thus, the Network's main purpose is not to develop proposals on street vending issues or lobby governments on policy. Instead, it aims to position women within the leadership ranks of their own organisations, transforming

them into protagonists to pursue whatever projects or proposals they see fit. The Network is also committed to transparent and democratic principles of governance, including rotation of its own leadership and maintenance of its legal status.

The Network got off the ground with funding from a Peruvian NGO, Alternativa, as part of a broader project with Intermón Oxfam. In its first three years of existence, the Network managed to establish 17 local-level networks incorporating 600 individual members. The Network is also affiliated to one of the country's main trade unions, the CUT, which in turn is linked to international workers' organisations.

Objectives of the Women's Network

The primary objectives of the Women's Network are to organize women who work as street and market vendors into small-scale networks designed to help them realize and exercise their economic, social, and cultural rights; and to elevate the presence of these women inside their own organisations and in the public sphere. In doing so, the Network aims to strengthen existing street vending organisations and

⁸ Interview with Lissette Aliaga Linares, 21 September 2007.

The Network's activities include empowerment workshops, leadership training, and productive workshops to increase women's income generating capacity.

foster solidarity between men and women, and thereby avoid increasing competition or division within the street vending sector. Its emphasis is on gender equality and autonomy for women, particularly within the leadership ranks of street vending organisations.

The motivation for this emphasis on strengthening the presence of women inside of existing organisations is partly rooted in the historical domination of street vending organisations, and particularly the federations, by men. As one Network member said in a focus group interview, "The federations always existed, but none of the federations represent, or even speak of, women. The men always head the federations, and inside the base organisations, a man is also typically the head. And if it is a woman heading the organisation, she might be thought of as a joke." The Network thus aims to help women traders overcome the type of bias that in the past has prevented them from being viewed as viable leadership candidates.

The Women's Network also aspires to construct alliances with public and private institutions, be they local or global, and in the process to position the concerns of women more centrally within associations and in public opinion. By developing the capacity of women to articulate their concerns and develop collective



projects to address them, the Network's founders hope to achieve gender equality at the workplace, inside of households, and throughout society.

Primary Activities and Achievements of the Women's Network

Empowerment Workshops

One of the main activities of the network is to hold workshops that promote self-esteem, reinforce the notion of self-respect, and encourage women to respect their own rights as workers. According to one Network member, these workshops encouraged her to view herself not as 'just' a street vendor, but as a micro-entrepreneur, and as such a

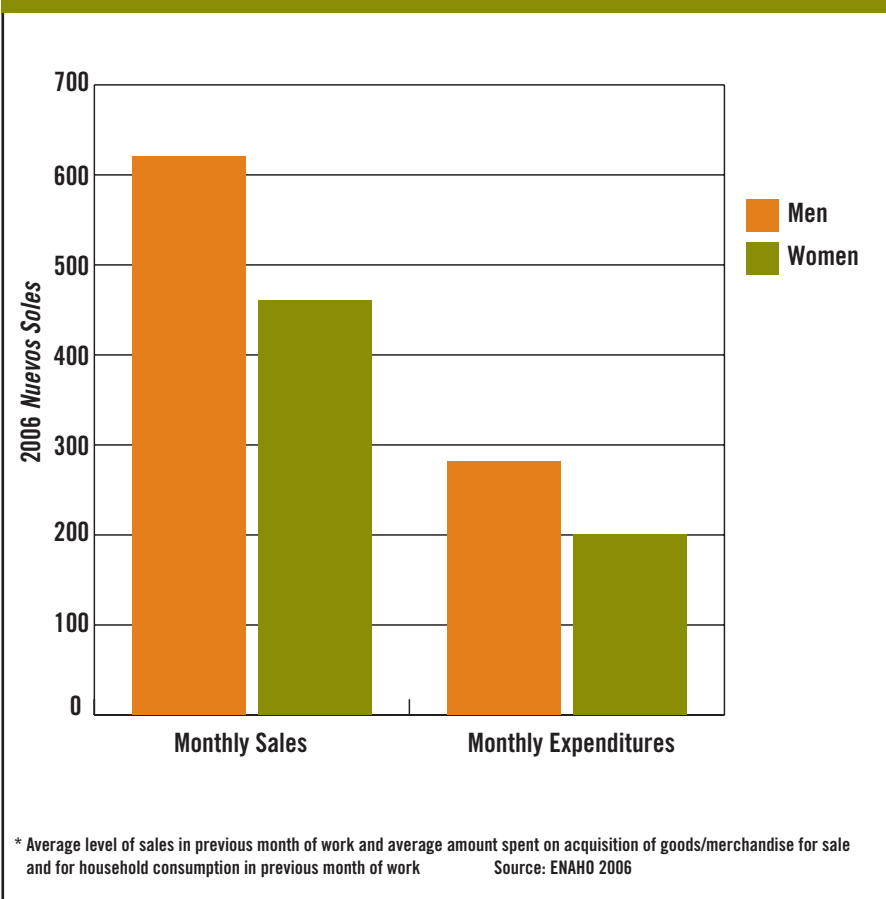
vital part of the country's economic machinery. The values of self-esteem and self-respect are also translated to the household. As another Network member said, "we have learned to value our rights, respect ourselves as people, and to develop ourselves both in the household and the workplace."

The emphasis on self-esteem and empowerment has helped the Network raise the level of participation among women in base-level associations. One member said that before getting involved in the Network she was "deathly afraid" of becoming vocal inside of her organisation, but once she learned what her rights were, she realized that participation was vital. "Women," she said, "know what we can do better than men."

Leadership Skills

The Network also provides training in the leadership skills necessary to run an organisation. This training addresses the overall conduct

Monthly Sales and Expenditures Among Lima's Street Vendors, By Sex



of individuals – as one member put it, “how one should carry herself” – as well as the day-to-day management of leadership positions. The leadership training includes an emphasis on developing projects that would qualify for the support of non-governmental organisations, which in turn advances the Network’s goal of developing strategic alliances in support of gender equality.

Arming women with leadership skills has helped improve the perception of women as leaders within the sector. One founding member reported that while a lot of women were very quiet within their organisations and few held leadership positions before the Network existed, many had taken up leadership positions and even become presidents of their organisations since the Network formed. The election of women

as presidents of street vending organisations is an especially important achievement because traditionally women were only elected or appointed to supporting positions, such as secretaries and social coordinators, which have been perceived as women’s roles.

Productive Skills: Income-Generating Workshops

One of the Network’s most frequent and successful activities is to hold productive workshops to increase women’s income generating capacity. With the support of a local NGO, an initial group of leaders received training in a variety of income-generating skills, such as chocolate making. Those leaders then went from base organisation to base organisation to train other women in those productive skills.

Each workshop required a symbolic payment from the participants, but then participants had two opportunities to generate additional income: first, through the productive skill itself; and second, by becoming a teacher and holding additional training workshops with other base organisations.

In that way, the productive workshops achieve two of the Network’s aims simultaneously. First, they support women by increasing their income generating potential through the acquisition of new skills and through the opportunity to teach others those skills. This is an important achievement, as one of the most common struggles for women street vendors in Peru is the lack of income security. Second, they provide a way for the Network to involve more women in its activities. These productive workshops contributed to the Network’s expansion from the founding 12 members to the current membership of 600.

Cultural Events

In addition to entrepreneurial and leadership activities, the Women’s Network also co-sponsors cultural events that encourage men and women to express their artistic and athletic talents, as well as their cultural heritage. These events, which include soccer and volleyball tournaments and song and dance contests, offer a space in which Network members and others can reinforce their personal identity and community traditions. The organisation and preparation of these events, based on the modest economic resources at hand, help unite Network members and others in the sector to discover and share values and traditions celebrated by individuals and families.

The Future of the Women's Network

The Network hopes to build on its achievements by promoting some new projects and by developing its linkages with other organisations in support of the street vending sector as a whole. One idea for a new project is to create a type of community centre for women street vendors called the 'Casa de la Mujer,' or 'Women's House.' The purpose of the centre would be to provide affordable childcare for young children during the day, with an after-school component for school-age children of street vendors. This project would address one of the most urgent needs of women street vendors by providing a secure environment for children while their mothers are working.

In terms of its strategic alliances, the Network joined ranks in 2009 with the Confederation of Street and Market Vendors of Lima and Callao (CONFIAR) in submitting a platform to the President of the CUT. The joint platform appeals to the union to help bring an end to the expulsions and confiscations of merchandise that continue to threaten vendors' livelihoods, and to promote formalisation in a more progressive manner.

Like other new organisations, the Women's Network also faces challenges that must be overcome. The issue of sustainability is a primary concern. Above all, the Network must determine how to secure additional funding in order to maintain its activities. Another consideration is whether and how to expand membership beyond its base of women street and market vendors.

At present, the Network's activities involve not only women street

vendors, but also other kinds of self-employed women, and participants in community kitchens (*comedores populares*). The Network and its allies must now consider whether and how to involve self-employed women in general, as well as men, in their activities and alliances. These questions have become particularly challenging as some of the Network's founding leaders have been pulled into different activities or occupied with other concerns.

Meanwhile, the continuing threat of expulsions in key market areas of Lima has required many members to prioritize local concerns. Strengthening the articulation between the Network's leadership and committees with members' own base organisation is also critical to the Network's success. The Network's current leadership must now find a way to build organisational momentum in the face of a deficit in human and financial resources.

Photos appearing on pages 1-3 by Carmen Roca. Page 4 photo courtesy of Guillermo Nolasco.

WIEGO Organizing Briefs contain information on organizing strategies and practices in the informal economy. This series aims to support organizing efforts and disseminate better practices.

ABOUT WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO draws its membership from membership-based organisations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy. For more information see www.wiego.org.

ABOUT INCLUSIVE CITIES: Launched in 2008, the Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organisations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organising, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes. Inclusive Cities is a collaboration between MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs and those supporting the work of MBOs. For more information see www.inclusive.cities.org.

