



Reina Isabel Vidal and Monica Calvo Ortiz in the offices of Flor de Piedra.

Stone flowers

A pioneering organisation in El Salvador is helping to raise the self-esteem of sex workers, writes **Finola Robinson**

IT'S A HOT WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON in San Salvador, El Salvador's busy capital city. Crowds throng the streets: market-traders ply their wares along the roadside, people shop for fruit and vegetables, students wait at bus-stops. San Salvador is a city buzzing with life.

But it is also a city of harsh extremes, with an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor. In the quiet, tree-lined streets of the rich neighbourhoods, mansions are protected by armed guards. The poorest districts, meanwhile, are equally deserted, but for a totally different reason: even in daylight, some streets are just too dangerous to walk down.

CIIR/ICD partner organisation, Asociación de Mujeres Flor de Piedra (the Stone Flower Women's Association), is situated in a quiet backstreet in one of the city's danger spots – the red-light district. Flor de Piedra is the only organisation in the country working with sex workers to protect and promote their rights, and its location is, therefore, intentional. The offices have to be

accessible to the organisation's members and users – the sex workers who trade in the nearby parks and brothels.

Desperation

Reina Isabel Vidal, 43, first visited Flor de Piedra five years ago after hearing about the association through a friend. 'I used to work in a sweatshop where there was so much exploitation that a group of us formed an illegal union, but the owner found out what we were doing and we were fired,' she remembers.

'The sweatshop paid me \$57 every two weeks, which isn't much, but jobs are so hard to come by. I took my CV to numerous companies but no-one would take me on. All the women in the sweatshops are between 18 and 28 years old and I was 32 at the time so doors were automatically closed to me.'

Reina's cousin told her about a room that was available. 'I was very hesitant about it because of my upbringing. I thought sex work was disgusting and I didn't want to do it but my cousin kept telling me that I could earn some money.

I had two children to feed on my own and my cousin said that sex work was really no different to sleeping with a boyfriend. I was so desperate, I agreed to do it.'

Rights

Although prostitution is legal in El Salvador, the public perception of sex workers is mired in prejudice and hostility. Sex workers and homosexuals are regarded as the source of HIV and violent assaults are common.

CIIR/ICD development worker Monica Calvo Ortiz is working with Flor de Piedra to strengthen its communications strategy and improve public awareness of the rights of sex workers. She says: 'The main reason someone becomes a sex worker is lack of money but most of the women have family problems. Sometimes women can't even get the most basic job and life just imposes this situation on them.'

Dignity

Flor de Piedra was set up in 1990. The word 'flower' in the name was chosen to reflect the beauty of women and 'stone' represents the hard life they lead. Flor de Piedra now works on a wide range of activities, including preventative health schemes, education, awareness raising and condom distribution. There's also a psychotherapist who gives individual sessions, free of charge, and a lawyer who gives legal advice and helps the women to understand their rights.

Over the years, the focus has shifted from attempting to equip sex workers with skills and reintegrate them into society, to focusing primarily on human rights and on giving sex workers back their dignity. Flor de Piedra currently works with around 700 sex workers.

Flor de Piedra also runs a scheme whereby sex workers are trained in-house to educate and inform others. Reina, who recently went through the training, says: 'Sometimes I am insulted in the street because of my involvement with Flor de Piedra but I can respect myself far more now. My self-esteem is no longer on the floor.'

Finola Robinson is CIIR/ICD's press and information officer.