

## Yo Merezco (I deserve): Latina Empowerment Through HIV/AIDS Education

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### Abstract

The majority (76%) of Honduras's 39,000 HIV/AIDS cases are among 20-39 year olds. UNAIDS reports that just 30% of Honduran women aged 15-24 could identify HIV transmission/prevention methods, compared to 39% of similar aged men. These data coupled with an historic lack of sexual decision making among Latinas encouraged a group of United States Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) to design an HIV/AIDS education program targeting young Latinas. Yo Merezco exists is a Spanish language HIV prevention and education program which was written in collaboration with and targeted towards community counterparts including schools, youth groups and churches. Knowledge alone does not induce healthy behaviors. We designed Yo Merezco to be a mentorship program which teaches HIV prevention by empowering Latinas to understand and value their bodies. We do this through a series of lessons which build upon each other but carry a common theme: "Yo Merezco/I deserve...good health, a better life, friendship, understanding and a future." Since 2007, Yo Merezco has been implemented by PCVs, community counterparts and NGOs throughout Central America. It been validated in over 100 youth-groups, with well over 1000 young Latinas enrolled. Peace Corps Honduras has adopted the program into its standard Volunteer training curricula and is expanding the program into neighboring Central American countries. We've seen success with Yo Merezco because it is long term, targeted, and presented in an environment of peers. By nature of training local health educators it continues as a sustainable element in HIV/AIDS education in Central America.

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