



HEALTH COMMUNICATION  
PARTNERSHIP

# PARTNERS<sup>in</sup> Acción

*Case Study:*  
**Movimiento  
Manuela  
Ramos**

BY ANA MARIA YANEZ\*

Women's dreams can be powerful. In the case of Peru's Movimiento Manuela Ramos (MMR), a collective vision to improve women's lives resulted in 26 years of empowering Peruvian women. MMR today is recognized as one of the leading authorities on women's rights in Peru when dealing with the government, political parties, interest groups, the media, and civil society organizations.

MMR was created in 1978 to advocate for gender equity for Peruvian women in all aspects of legal, economic, social, political, and reproductive rights. Health communication played an essential role in MMR's success as it mobilized Peru's migrant community, involved men in reproductive health issues, and worked to promote gender equity. MMR reached more than 300,000 Peruvians directly and countless more indirectly through programs aimed at achieving its vision of a future where women and men live in equitable relationships and have the opportunity to fully realize their potential in a pluralistic, democratic society that guarantees human rights. Its mission is to

contribute to human development and consolidate democracy by bringing about gender equity through the empowerment of women.

## The Early Years

When MMR began, Peru was just emerging from 10 years of military dictatorship. Despite one of the worst economic downturns in Peru's history with high debt and staggering inflation, democracy was beginning to take hold. With this, the rural poor began migrating towards cities, giving birth to "Pueblos Jóvenes" (young towns) or poor settlements. Women living in these poor settlements faced many challenges and still face them today.

Seven women involved in politics and organized labor began meeting in early 1978 to discuss their dissatisfaction with women's participation in the political system. They realized that it was their responsibility to get women's issues elevated to the public agenda since no one else was actively promoting these issues. The group decided to call themselves "Movimiento" (movement

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**Partners in Action** is a series of case studies produced by the Health Communication Partnership (HCP). Based at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs (CCP), HCP is supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development and includes CCP, the Academy for Educational Development, Save the Children, the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, and Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. In addition to the five main partners, HCP works with partners from the private sector, faith-based organizations, and locally based organizations to strengthen public health in the developing world. Partners in Action profiles HCP's Southern-based partners and their experience in the field of strategic health communication. Each issue features background on the country where the partner is based, a brief history of the partner's evolution, and key moments that led to its success.

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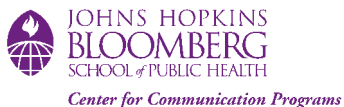
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 Photos courtesy of: Movimiento Manuela Ramos

HCP would like to thank Frescia Carrasco, Jennie Dador, Rocio Gutierrez, Rosa Espinoza, Victoria Villanueva, and Susana Moscoso for their valuable contributions in developing this case study.



**The Health Communication Partnership**

**Based at:**



**In partnership with:**



Supported by a five-year cooperative agreement from the U.S. Agency for International Development (#GPH-A-00-02-00008-00)

in Spanish) to symbolize their ability to adapt to changing political and social situations. They adopted the name “Manuela Ramos” to represent an anonymous woman battling each day to improve her situation.

By 1980, MMR recognized the need to find out exactly how women viewed their sexuality, work, and life in general. They decided to look for answers among women from the poor settlements of Lima. MMR always considered migrant women an important audience for their work because these women were already demanding that the Peruvian government provide basic services and access to utilities, health, and education to improve their living conditions.

MMR staff conducted an assessment of living conditions for women living in poor settlements to better understand their interests and concerns. With these results in hand and support from the Dutch Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), MMR held a number of participatory assessments, including three workshops with poor migrant women to determine where it would focus its efforts. In an “Identity and Sexuality” workshop, women were asked to define their identity through their sexuality, by taking ownership of their body, attitudes, and feelings. A workshop on “Valuation and Work” focused on women's desire to be acknowledged for their domestic work and also emphasized self-confidence. The “Organization and Participation” workshop demonstrated the importance of belonging to an organization and identified ways to bring about change through participation.

## Identifying Priorities

MMR then began to establish close connections with women in poor settlements, which helped the organization identify their demands and needs. For example, problems such as domestic violence and women's health were not receiving enough attention from the government. MMR chose Health Promoters and Legal Advisors from the women who participated in the training programs. The Health Promoters developed health education and promotional activities for women. They also worked with local organizations and the community on preventive health and women's rights issues. The Legal Advisors provided legal advice in cases of domestic or sexual violence but also promoted women's and children's rights through informative talks and sensitization campaigns. Some of the original Health Promoters and Legal Advisors are still performing these tasks today for MMR.

MMR later developed a communication program to provide an outlet for women to openly discuss their issues through two radio programs. **Pásame la Voz** (Let me know) allowed women to express their thoughts and get to know their neighbors' thinking, while **Prohibido Escuchar** (Forbidden to listen) allowed youth to express their doubts and ask about relevant topics. In addition, MMR published 12 photonovels during the 1990s.

A lack of quality health services for women in the southern part of Lima led MMR to establish a community consulting center for women's health, which primarily offered sexual and reproductive health services from 1989 to 1997. With ICCO support, MMR built **Casa del Bien-Estar** (Well-being House)

in 1997 to provide women in that area with reproductive health services, legal counseling for domestic violence cases, and credit for entrepreneurial women. Today, ***Casa del Bien-Estar*** provides health services to 10,000 women a year with 11 health promoters, one doctor, one midwife, and one dentist.

In addition to domestic violence and reproductive health problems, MMR also recognized the impact of economic problems on Peru's women. MMR established its ***Generación de Ingresos*** (income generation) program in 1985 to help women better survive Peru's economic crisis and provide them with more autonomy and better control of their financial destiny. They launched ***Mujeres Creativas*** (Creative Women), a handicraft workshop for artisan women that gave them a clear understanding of their economic rights to produce their crafts. With the support of the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB), MMR started a credit line for entrepreneurial women in southern Lima in 1992 to provide them with access to financial resources as well as counseling

and training in enterprise and individual development. In 1993, MMR opened ***Casa de la Mujer Artesana*** (Artisan Women's House), a store for handicrafts from Lima and the regions that combined craft production with a sales outlet.

### MMR Goes Nationwide

With the award of a large contract in 1995 from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), MMR was able to expand its activities nationwide. The ***ReproSalud*** project promoted reproductive and sexual health in Peru's rural areas and urban slums. MMR began working in 91 districts in eight regions (San Martin, Ucayali, Huancavelica, Ayacucho, Puno, La Libertad, Lima y Ancash) with teams that spoke both Quechua and Aymara. The project reached 250,000 women and 120,000 men over the last decade. And its training program led to 200,000 new trainers.

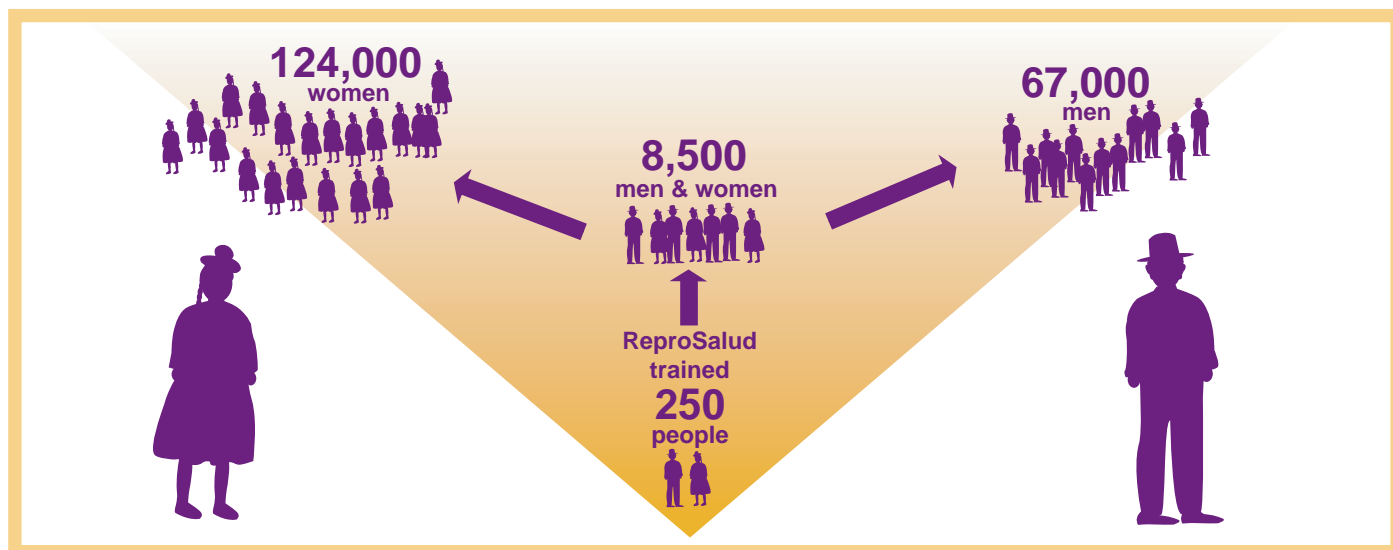
***ReproSalud*** was unique because it engaged women in the community to help design the project and define their



sexual and reproductive health problems. Once the problems were identified through a self-assessment process, a communication strategy based on the principle of community mobilization was developed. ***ReproSalud*** also worked with women's organizations to develop their capacity and provide the resources necessary to implement the strategy. Each community helped ***ReproSalud*** evaluate the project to determine successful strategies and those needing improvement.

### ReproSalud Tests MMR

But winning the ***ReproSalud*** project forced MMR to drastically upscale its activities in a short period of time. MMR's annual budget jumped from



***ReproSalud trained 250, who then trained 8,500, and they trained close to 200,000.***

\$700,000 to \$5 million. To help manage these new resources, MMR had to quickly add to its management team. Practically overnight, MMR went from a 40-person operation to an organization with 250 full-time staff working throughout Peru. MMR's solid 16 years of organizational experience helped it effectively face the challenges brought on by this rapid change.

Implementing **ReproSalud** also required the participation of the women the project hoped to reach. At that time, rural women considered reproductive and sexual health extremely private issues and were embarrassed to discuss them openly. MMR overcame this barrier by helping women realize the commonality of their reproductive health issues. MMR convinced them that open discussion could help define solutions that could be used to make necessary changes in the health care delivery system. MMR also had to deal with men's objections to **ReproSalud**. Men did not approve of some of the project's issues and they doubted the women's ability to meet the project's demands. But once men saw the women in their lives taking control and implementing the project, they decided to help out too and began working in the capacity workshops.

### Current Focus Areas

In recent years, MMR has focused its efforts in the following areas:

- **LEGAL PROMOTION AND DEFENSE.** This service provides legal advice to victims of domestic violence through their Legal Advisors. MMR also offers routine training for law enforcement including police officers, prosecutors, and judges.

- **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND CITIZEN'S RIGHTS.** MMR closely monitors political developments at the national level and produces an electronic bulletin to keep interested networks informed. MMR recently trained staff of Peru's political parties to make them more sensitive to issues involving women's rights.
- **SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS.** MMR staff in this focus area are responsible for implementing the health components of **Casa del Bien-Estar** and **ReproSalud**.
- **ECONOMIC RIGHTS.** MMR provides financial services such as the Community Bank and **CrediMujer**, along with other services that train and develop women entrepreneurs.

credit and savings, and still receive support and assistance from MMR for their regular operation. MMR also promoted **MercoMujer**, an enterprise project that connects external demand for Peruvian handicrafts with women capable of producing them. With the support of North American designers, women were trained to manufacture the products sold in foreign markets, mainly the US.

### Major Turning Points

Deciding to focus its work initially on women living in Peru's poor settlements set MMR on the path to defining its work based on the needs of the women it wanted to reach. It helped MMR define its mission and how it approached the business of empowering women. Through a participatory process, MMR listened to these women and helped motivate them to be agents for their



*Peru's rural women are the focus of MMR's work*

Since economic problems affect women from both urban and rural areas in Peru, MMR set up communal banks managed by women's organizations in four different regions with financial support from **ReproSalud**. The banks offered

own change. MMR's participatory approach, which had not been used by other organizations working in Peru's poor neighborhoods, helped women assess their current situation, their concerns, their sexuality, and health.

This approach also allowed women to realize they were capable of organizing to demand political changes.

In addition to adopting this participatory approach, the following turning points helped shape MMR:

- MMR was at the forefront of Peru's women's rights movement. Once it defined itself as a women's rights organization, MMR had a greater institutional identity, both internally and with other women's groups in Peru. MMR became the voice for women in Peru, acting as the organization to represent women at the national level. Government institutions consider MMR's position now when approving or modifying any law or public policy relevant to women.
- The **ReproSalud** project gave MMR a chance to take what it learned from poor women at the rural level nationwide. **ReproSalud** led to sustainability for MMR's work in rural areas and helped MMR learn new ways to address health issues and women's rights. The opening of **Casa del Bien-Estar** in 1997 allowed MMR to help establish quality standards for public health services and provided women with support and access to information about their rights.
- Another turning point came when MMR helped promote a female candidate to the Republic's Congress in 2000 by producing a television program called **Palabra de Mujer** (Woman's Word). When the election ended, MMR renamed the program **Barra de Mujeres** (Women's Forum) to help shape opinions on women's rights. This program gave MMR a

platform to denounce any attempts to curtail women's rights. Supported by USAID, the weekly **Barra de Mujeres** was co-produced by MMR and cable station Channel N.

talked to women about sexuality and their rights. Local women with more traditional training such as dressmaking also opposed MMR's approach, but these barriers eventually broke down as they



*MMR helped get domestic violence on the public agenda*

- MMR also used entertainment-education to promote gender equity and women's rights. As part of **ReproSalud**, MMR introduced three radio serials: **Evelyn, una mujer como tu** (Evelyn, a woman just like you), which covered issues related to pregnancy, delivery, and post-delivery; **Manuela te quiero** (I love you Manuela), which provided information about sexuality and the body; and **Las Micaelas de hoy** (Today's Micaelas, referring to Micaela Bastidas, a Peruvian heroine), which covered contraception. All three were based on community surveys and data collected related to the topics, which made them more credible, and gave them a cross-cultural perspective.

### Main Challenges

Introducing women's rights to Lima's poor communities was MMR's first challenge. Some community leaders and groups opposed MMR because its staff

realized the potential they had to improve their lives. MMR also kept community leaders informed about its activities and coordinated some with them, thus turning them into advocates too. Eventually, MMR involved men and young men in training activities. Transforming women's problems and demands into concrete proposals for policy change presented another challenge. MMR was forced to stop confronting and challenging the government and instead represent women effectively at the national level. The organizations fighting for Peru's women needed to be seen as credible and capable of proposing workable solutions based on their knowledge of women's issues. MMR overcame this challenge by becoming the national authority on issues related to reproductive health and women's rights.

High turnover among Peru's health service providers and justice system consistently challenges MMR as it works

to keep them informed about gender equity. To address this challenge, MMR implemented routine training for service providers in the health and justice sectors. MMR works with the Peruvian National Police, Judicial Branch, and the National Academy of Magistracy to make sure gender is covered in human rights training.

### Conservative Opposition

Because MMR was a pioneer in promoting women's rights in Peru, it often found itself balancing its position on social issues with those held by local government or donor agencies. For example, MMR publicly agreed to not be involved in any activities to change Peru's abortion laws as a condition of its *ReproSalud* contract. MMR also clashed several times with Peru's conservative ruling party. In one instance, a former Minister of Health objected to some of the content in *Barra de Mujeres*, and asked the U.S. to stop funding this activity through USAID. MMR managed this controversy by publicly presenting evidence of the program's public health benefits. Criticism and controversy attracted public attention and provided an opportunity for MMR to promote its programs to an even wider audience. The public rallied behind MMR, rejecting calls for censorship of information with a public health benefit.

### Lessons Learned

Some key lessons can be derived from MMR's story:

- **DEVELOP ALLIANCES**

MMR learned that rapid institutional growth should not end existing strategic partnerships. Growth should lead organizations to seek out more alliances with other organizations to

coordinate activities and work together for a common agenda. By collaborating with other women's groups, MMR was able to change laws and public policies to strengthen women's rights in Peru.

- **USE PARTICIPATORY ACTION**

MMR understood early on the importance of working with women in a participatory fashion because of its mission to improve women's lives. Promoting and defending women's rights is sustainable when women are empowered with the knowledge and skills to carry out such activities.

- **BELIEVE IN YOUR MISSION**

MMR made difficult decisions as it overcame significant challenges. MMR'S experience with USAID led it to conclude that commitment to its mission is paramount to allow an organization to successfully design and implement a project to achieve its objective. In unstable countries such as Peru, it is unrealistic to expect sustainability after only two years into a project. A successful project needs time to get established and grow so that it can eventually sustain its own operation, whether through additional government funding or by generating its own funding base.

- **BE OPEN TO CHANGE**

MMR learned to constantly monitor the political environment for developments that could affect its work. Being flexible can help when responding to changing political and social situations or managing controversies or criticism. Civil society organizations must be open-minded as they observe trends in the international arena, banking, government, politics, women's issues, or social dynamics to

take advantage of these trends. Clear objectives also allow an organization to use trends to its advantage.

- **MANAGE RAPID GROWTH**

MMR's ability to successfully implement a \$5-million project was due in part to the experience of its staff at the time of the *ReproSalud* award. A strong understanding of reproductive health and other issues affecting women as well as its experienced and skilled staff that chose competent new employees allowed MMR to expand exponentially in a very short time.

### In conclusion...

Advocacy and communication played a crucial role as MMR implemented a large-scale reproductive health project in a country that previously considered such issues a private matter. MMR mobilized Peru's rural poor communities, involved men in reproductive health activities, and promoted gender equity by inspiring women to be entrepreneurs. Allowing women, and later men, to participate in activities was a key factor in MMR's success in promoting and defending women's rights. This community mobilization approach not only got women talking openly about reproductive health, but also led to men getting involved in promoting reproductive health and gender equity issues. Finally, MMR worked with organizations with similar goals to achieve social and political change. This case study demonstrates the value of including health communication to help sustain quality reproductive health services despite major policy changes both in Peru and internationally.