

Addressing Sexual Health among Women who Use Substances in the Marginal Urban Communities of Latin America: An Ethnographic Analysis and Pilot Study

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Substance Use Among Women

Women who use substances have received less attention than men who use substances.

- ▶ Men are 2-3 times likelier than women to have used an illicit substance (UN Women, 2014).
- ▶ Many of the public health effects of drugs are gender-specific (SAMHSA, 2014).
- ▶ Worldwide, female substance users (FSUs) are at higher risk of poor sexual health (unplanned pregnancies, abortions, sexual exchanges, and violence) (Hecksher et al., 2015).

Prevalence of HIV and STIs Among FSUs in San Salvador (Glasman, et al., 2016)

We surveyed 230 Salvadoran women and tested them for HIV.

- ▶ HIV positive = 8.0% to 8.6% (vs. 1.9% to 4% among men, $p = .040$)
- ▶ Past-year STI = 14.9%
- ▶ Women reporting high-risk sexual behavior: 93%
 - ▶ 79% multiple partners
 - ▶ 60% transactional sex
 - ▶ 10% sexual violence
- ▶ FSUs use substances that increase sexual risk (e.g., alcohol, cocaine derivatives).
- ▶ No women reported injection drug use.

Proyecto Encuentro (R01 DA02035, Dickson-Gomez)

Encuentro is an HIV prevention intervention for non-injection substance users in marginal communities of El Salvador.

- ▶ Peer referrals to HIV testing
- ▶ Peer facilitated counseling to reduce HIV risk

Implementation of Encuentro:

Few FSUs attended Encuentro despite contact with the intervention team.

- ▶ FSUs do not disclose substance use or want to be associated with stigmatized groups.
- ▶ FSUs receive derogatory comments when they request sexual health services.
- ▶ FSUs are considered poor decision makers and are denied services out of the belief that they would not comply with treatment or benefit from it.
- ▶ 40% of the women who exchanged sex for drugs or money did not consider themselves sex workers and did not receive any type of prevention intervention.
- ▶ The programs are unidimensional and do not target FSUs

Social Determinants of FSUs' Poor Sexual Health

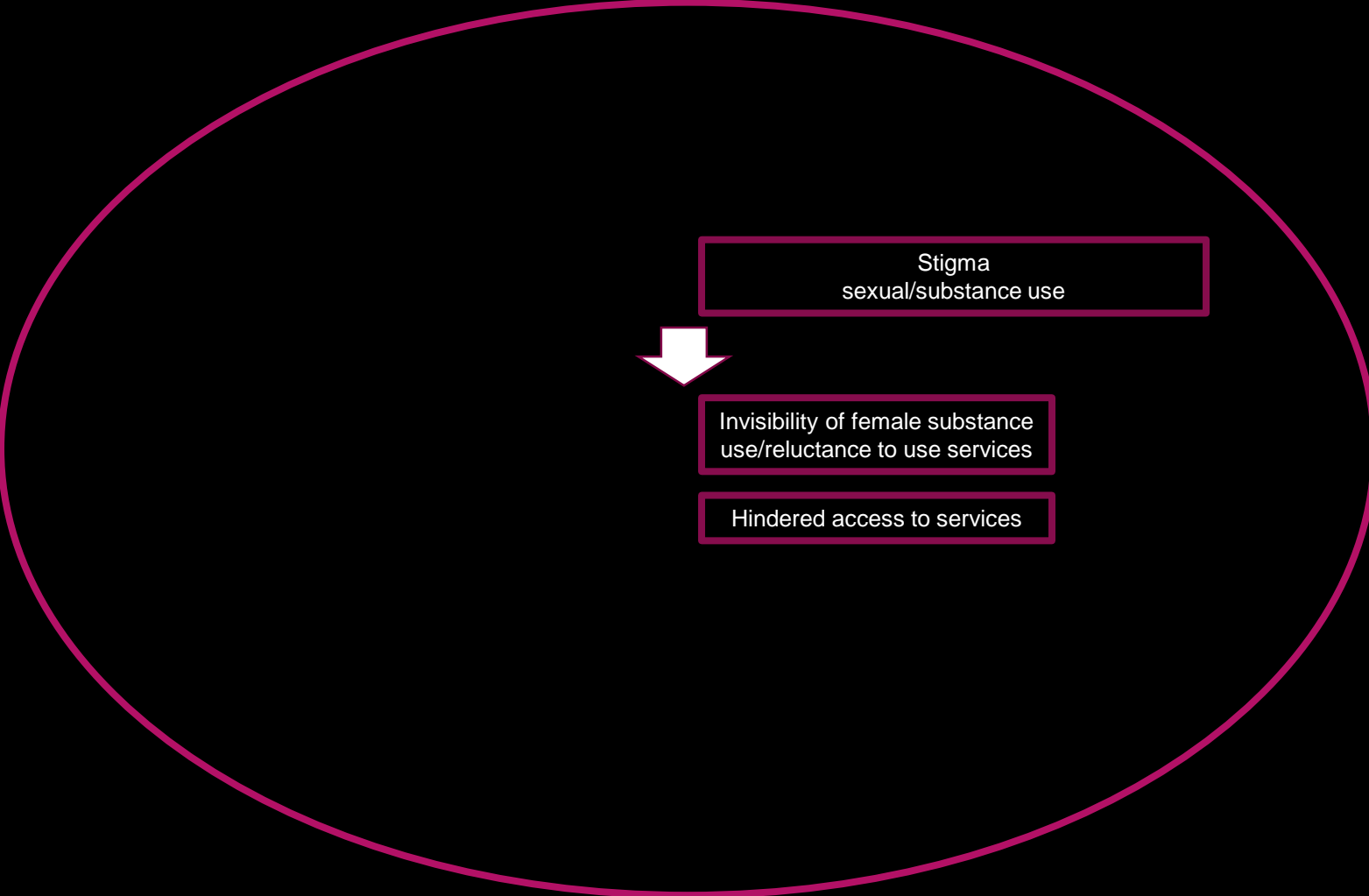
- ▶ Substance use stigma
- ▶ Community violence

Substance-Use Stigma

The challenges that affect FSUs' sexual health can be linked to social sanctions against Latin American women who use substances and have multiple partners.

- ▶ Gender norms protect Latin American women from substance use.
 - ▶ The gender gap in substance use is lower in more equal and economically developed countries and **among** younger populations.
- ▶ Gender norms have costs for women who **do** use substances, **by** breaking their social ties and alienating them from services.

Latin American Marginal Communities
Poor Structure of Governance



Community Violence

Vulnerable FSUs often reside or use substances in marginal urban communities.

- ▶ The state does not provide adequate structures of governance.
- ▶ Authorities do not have control of social and physical spaces.
 - ▶ Absence of public services and resources; displaced populations.
- ▶ Groups with different degrees of organization fight for economic gain and control population movements within their territories.
- ▶ The unregulated context encourages competition among men and masculine norms that normalize violence in the community and toward women.

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Developing MUSA

- ▶ Ethnographic observations
- ▶ Community input
- ▶ Interviews and focus groups with FSUs

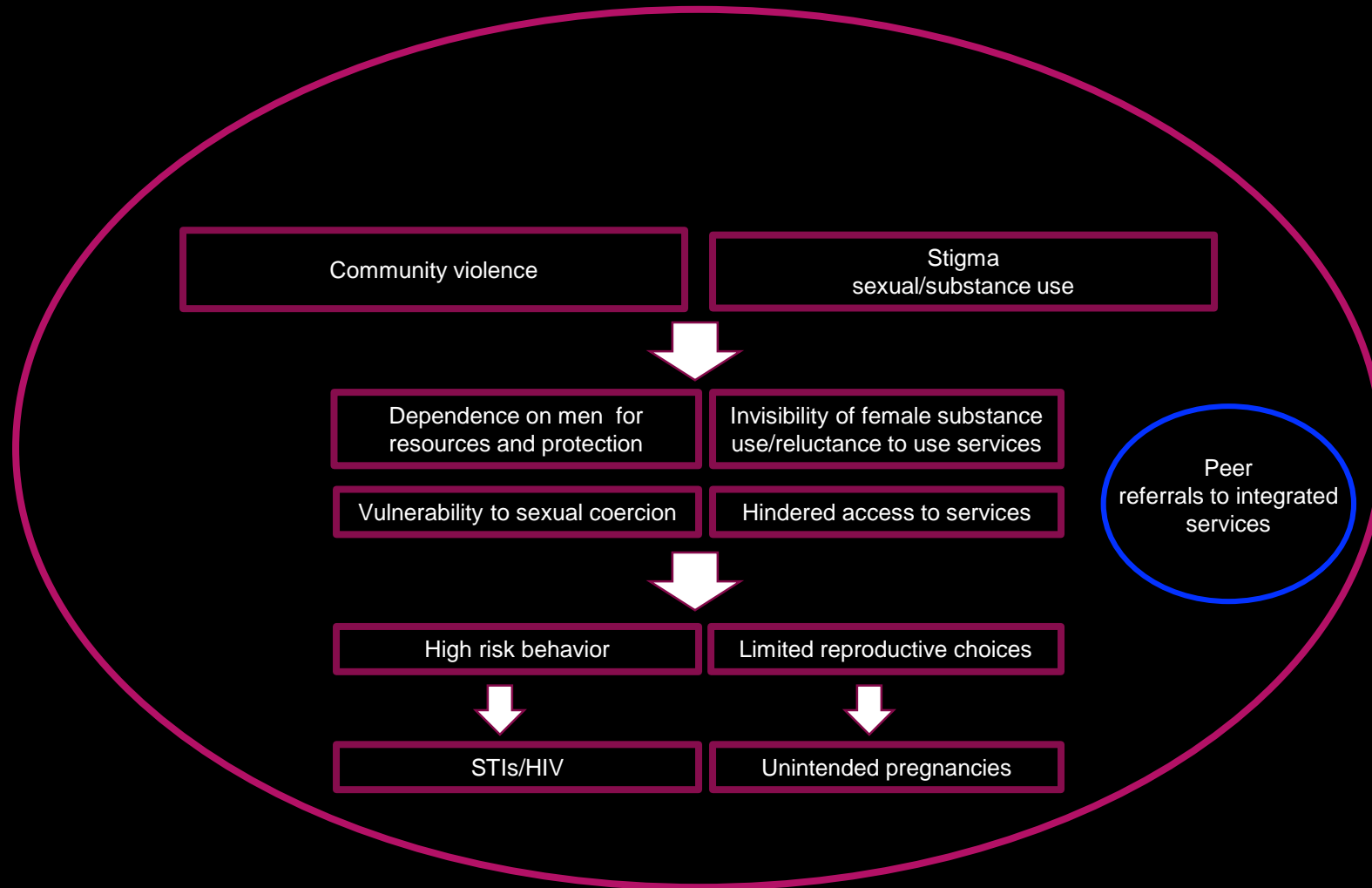
- ▶ Survey of community organizations to identify awareness of substance use among women

- ▶ Assessment of acceptability of:
 - ▶ Peer referrals
 - ▶ Opt-out services
 - ▶ Integration of services

- ▶ Plan, do, check, act cycles of workshops.

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How Likely Are You to Request/Accept an HIV Test in the Next Six Months? (N = 38)

		Would request an HIV test		
		No	Yes	Total
Would accept an HIV test	No	4 (21%)	0 (0%)	4 (10.5)
	Yes	15 (78.9%)	19 (100%)	34 (89.5)
		19 (100%)	19 (100%)	

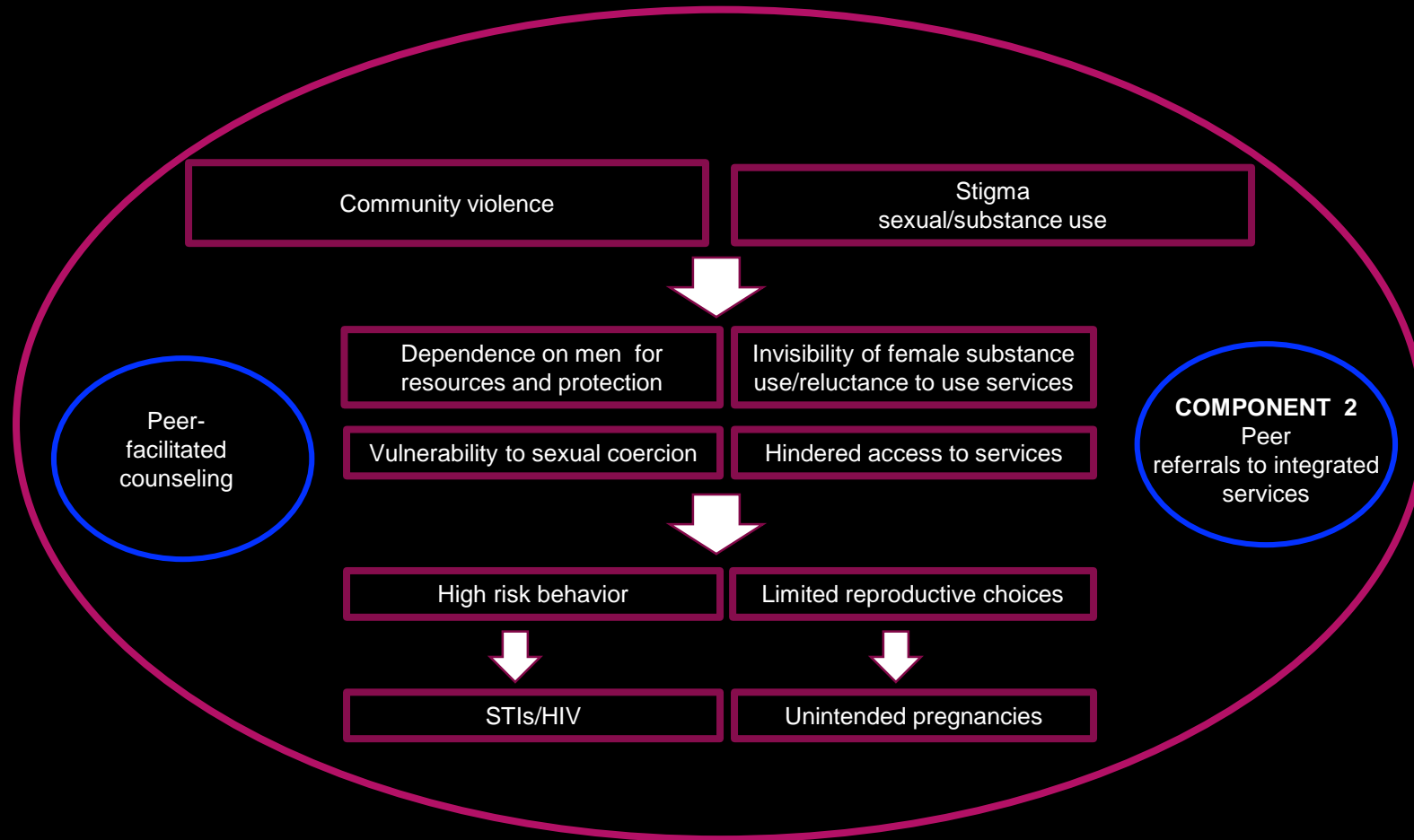
Acceptability of Integrated Services Among FSUs Who Would not Request HIV Testing (*N* =19)

Integrated services :

	Yes	No
Would be more acceptable in the community	18 (94.7)	1 (5.3%)
Would make me feel more comfortable with testing	18 (94.7)	1 (5.3)
Would engage more FSUs	18 (94.7)	1 (5.2)

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Peer-Facilitated Counseling

Peer-led counseling intervention with egocentric networks of FSUs

- ▶ Interpersonal context of FSUs sexual health risk with peers, partners and providers
 - ▶ FSUs developed personal and network resources to avoid/escape violence.
 - ▶ FSUs developed communication and harm reduction skills to protect their sexual health with partners.
 - ▶ FSUs learned about services relevant to their sexual health and strategies to communicate with providers about sexual health and substance use.

Peer Facilitated Counseling

Conducted rounds of plan, do, check, act:

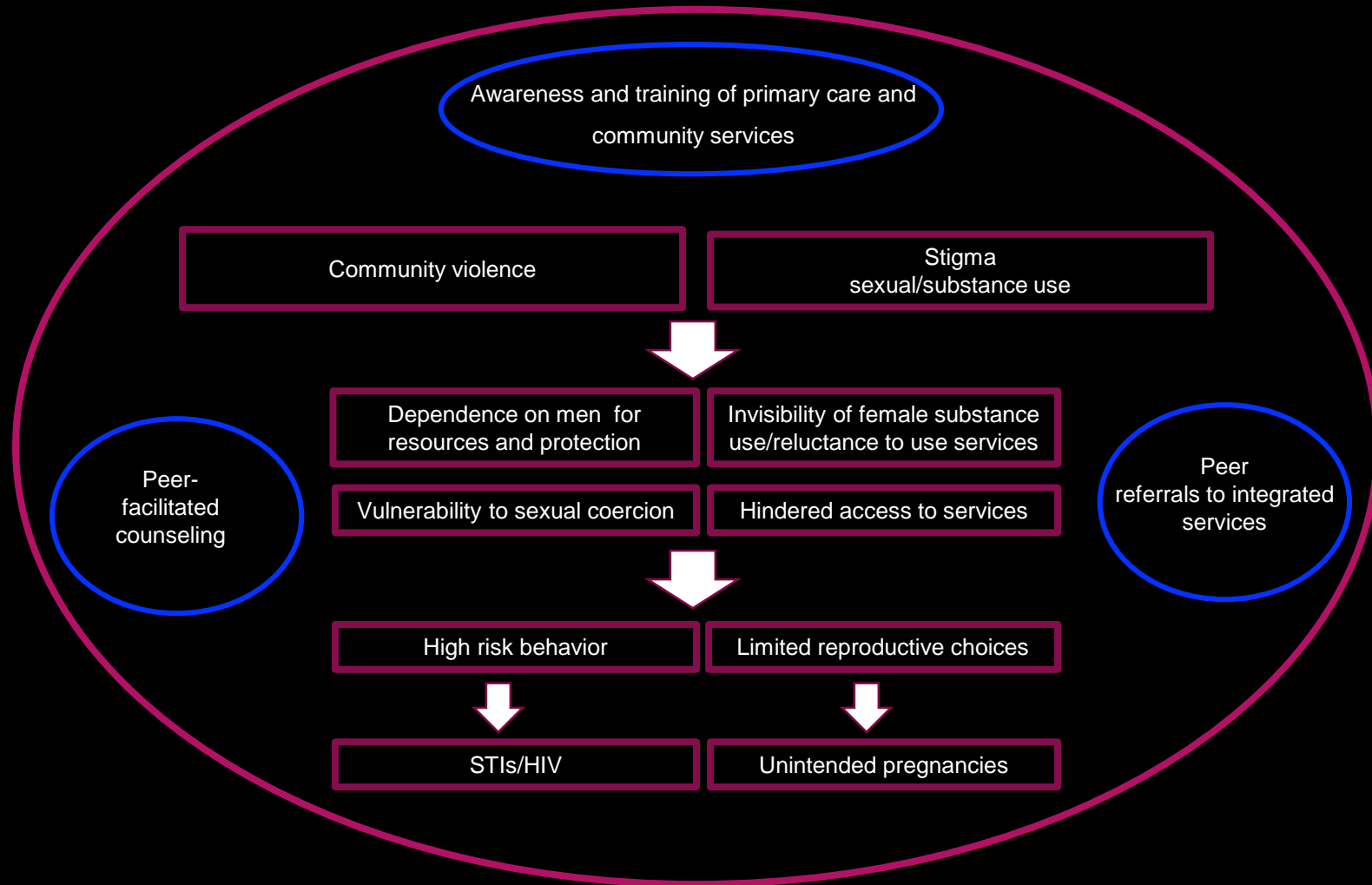
- ▶ Salvadoran team (first round)
- ▶ Community facilitators (second round)
- ▶ Community members: Feasibility (third round)
- ▶ Community members: Preliminary impact (fourth round)

Pilot Study: Comparison of MUSA and Control Women

	Control (<i>N</i> = 18) <i>M</i>	MUSA (<i>N</i> = 16) <i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>d</i>
Gender norms				
Substance use stigma	14.79	13.60	1.09	0.34
Equitable norms	28.21	30.67	5.79 ⁺	0.79
Coercion and violence				
Tolerance	1.52	1.04	6.10 [*]	0.81
Can seek help	3.17	3.40	1.25	0.37
Can prevent	3.00	3.40	2.79 ⁺	0.55
Risk behavior				
Safe sex motivation	19.63	25.27	20.88 ^{***}	1.50
Control perceptions	8.83	10.00	3.19 ⁺	0.59

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Age		24.47 (7.20)
< High school		28 (73.7%)
Has a main partner		14 (36.8%)
Use cocaine or crack		10 (26%)
Alcohol Audit > 7		35 (87.5%)