

## **AIDS Awareness Amongst Workers- A Myth or Reality?**

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*HIV and AIDS are buzzwords.*

*Everyone knows them. Yet the disease is spreading because of the lack of awareness and safe sex practices. A study of SWs in Nagaland and Calcutta reveals some frightening facts*

Miss Easter, a social worker, and I visited Sonagachi, one of the largest and oldest red light areas in Calcutta, in June '98. Here, amongst the humdrum of hawkers, shopkeepers and traders, large three and four storeyed crumbling houses, in narrow lanes, provide shelter to an estimated 4000 sex workers who live in 350 brothels. Their numbers grow by 1500 during festive seasons when a floating population of SWs come to the city from surrounding areas. They earn their livelihood from the 20,000 men who patronize them.

We visited a single room tenement, the home of a couple who, have one child. The parents have been in the profession for the last 15 years, despite which they have a relationship of mutual respect and a rugged determination to improve the lot of their daughter. Today the woman is a peer educator and is helping to spread awareness amongst her community.

An STD/HIV Intervention Programme, implemented by NACO and a few other NGOs, with sponsorship from WHO, in 1992 runs a Health Service Centre for SWs and their families. Although the emphasis is on sexual health they also provide other health services and have trained 65 SWs as peer educators. These peer educators work in groups in the 11 sub divisions of Sonagachi. They are responsible for IES activities and spreading information about condoms.

The SWs themselves have formed a Mahila Samanwaya Committee and have registered a cooperative called the Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Ltd. The first of its kind in Asia, it is an advocate of SWs rights, including the right to protection from HIV/AIDS for which it undertakes the marketing of high quality condoms at a lower rate than the market price. The SWs also visit other red light areas to spread information regarding the need for protection against all kinds of diseases.

The Akimbo Society, to which we belong, is based in Dimapur, Nagaland, and is involved in many activities for the upliftment of women and children. Dimapur is a fast growing town with a rapidly increasing population. Here, too, prostitution is on the rise due to the economic crisis in the state, unemployment, drug abuse, alcoholism and the great demand for SWs. It is a sad comment that many hotel managers knowingly permit SWs to operate from their hotels due to the lack of business. While originally the SWs were from outside the state, now local women have also joined the profession, in numbers approximating 3,000.

### **Unprotected Sex**

Unprotected sex is a major hazard and the incidence of HIV/AIDS is rapidly increasing. At the direction of NFI, we conducted a survey of SWs in Dimapur. The survey revealed a large unorganized section of SWs, operating as individuals from liquor shops, hotels and on the highway, as well as those who belong to brothels.

The brothels have a network of girls from Bangladesh, Nepal, Manipur, Assam and Bengal. They work in rotation and are sometimes exchanged with those in brothels in other states. Most suffer from STDs and do not practice safe sex, even if they know about HIV/AIDS. Similarly, at liquor and cold drink shops, the attendants are mostly local women who work as SWs. They do not follow safe sex norms.

Drug users form a large section of SWs. According to the Prodigals' Home there are over 500 female drug users in Dimapur. They sell sex to meet their drug expenses. With no de-addiction centres or help for these women, their plight is pathetic and the future of health in Nagaland, a scary nightmare.

Since 1997, we have been working on a Programme of Prevention of HIV/AIDS and STDs among SWs in Dimapur. Through group meetings and personal contacts information and awareness of the problem is spread. Education and mobilization are our hopes to salvage the situation, before it is too late.