

Underage female sex workers and HIV in Nepal

By Tulasa Lata Amatya



Leadership training for female sex workers. (Picture courtesy of CAC-Nepal)

Women and children face many problems in the gradually developing country of Nepal. Community Action Centre – Nepal (CAC-Nepal), a non-profit, non-governmental social organisation, was established in 1993 by a group of intellectuals, social workers, and community development workers to respond to the need for additional people’s efforts to overcome these challenges.

The centre aims at empowering women and children in the community by focusing on gender equality in order to make them independent and self-reliant.

CAC-Nepal’s objectives include action against trafficking of women and children through rescue and rehabilitation programmes. It addresses domestic violence against women and children by lobbying on their behalf. The organisation is involved in HIV and AIDS work and lobbies against sexual exploitation of women and children. The pioneering advocate for citizenship’s rights also implements programmes for high-risk child labourers and child migrants.

Nepal’s context

Most sex workers in Nepal operate under categories such as club hostesses, bar girls, dancers, guides and local street vendors. In most cases, the clients are males who are older than the sex workers with national figures showing a 1:20 ratio between the sex workers and their clients.

Of the 64,000 adults and children in Nepal infected with HIV, one in three is a woman. Recent cumulative data published by the National Centre for AIDS and STD Control (NCASC) show that 869 sex workers (out of 30,000) and 7,166 clients of these workers (out of 600,000) are living with HIV.

About 30 per cent of all female sex workers are underage girls. HIV infections in Nepal have rapidly increased in recent years, moving the country from low prevalence to concentrated epidemic status. The major mode of HIV

transmission in the country is unprotected sex, which leads to high rates of sexually-transmitted infections, including HIV, syphilis, gonorrhoea, genital warts and herpes simplex, all common in Nepal. Early diagnosis and treatment of these STIs would reduce the viral load, thereby limiting the risk of their spread to sexual partners.

It is therefore vital to educate female sex workers to practise safer sex and create an environment that enables them to learn about reproductive health including the different modes of transmission of STIs and HIV.

To this end, the government has designated female sex workers as one of the most-at-risk population’ (MARP) as regards HIV and has implemented various programmes to promote and sustain awareness among FSW on safer sex practises. This is deemed helpful in reducing HIV prevalence through behavioural change.

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CAC-Nepal

For the last eight years, CAC-Nepal, with help from the USAID through Family Health International (FHI), has been working with female sex workers in the three districts of Kathmandu Valley, namely Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. Through these years, the organisation has gained substantial knowledge and experience concerning programme approach, strategies, risks, and challenges of delivering required services related to HIV prevention, care support, and advocacy. The organisation has adopted a needs-based and participatory approach to programme planning.

Lessons learned

Undertaking pre-project assessment survey is essential in order to understand the needs and aspirations of the target population, their behaviour, nature of mobility and opinions of the female sex workers in programming. Likewise, relevant stakeholders should be consulted and strong networks with community people and stakeholders built at different levels before the actual programme implementation begins.

CAC-Nepal has been implementing a comprehensive programme among establishment-based sex workers in the valley for the prevention and control of HIV

and AIDS/STIs among female sex workers. The programme includes HIV prevention, counselling and testing, care, treatment, and support services.

Different types of methods like role-play, discussions, presentations, posters and public speaking have been used during stigma and discrimination training. The target groups are street-based, unskilled, uneducated and have a hard time understanding their own predicament. Dramatised skits greatly helped get the message across.

At the end of the session, the participants said they clearly understood about the stigma and discrimination that is rife. Decreasing HIV related stigma and discrimination is one of the components of this programme.

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Underage sex workers

Due to increased trafficking together with the 10-year civil conflict in the country, younger girls are brought into the city through forced internal migration. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of proper education, and discriminatory practises are some of the major factors contributing to these circumstances.

Additionally, young girls project the illusion that they are free from STIs and have had fewer clients. This has increased the demand for these young girls over the past years. Due to this threat, young girls are increasingly victimised and infected. Moreover, the belief that sex with a virgin cures people of STIs, including HIV, is prevalent. This, coupled with the rise of HIV and AIDS in the country, makes the need to tackle such problems not just at an individual level, but also at a community level urgent.

Some female sex workers are caught up in such work because of poverty. In order to mitigate this, CAC-Nepal has initiated various income-generating programmes. However, there are many relapses, as the income generated through these programmes could hardly meet their needs compared to what they potentially earn through sex work. FSWs are also a hidden population and quite mobile. Due to this, it becomes difficult to find them, track them, and give the care and services they require.



Community mobilisers discuss safer sex. (Picture courtesy of CAC-Nepal)



Training on stigma and discrimination. (Picture courtesy of CAC-Nepal)

Current programmes

CAC-Nepal's current activities revolve around HIV prevention programmes with sex workers, their clients, and people living with HIV and AIDS. Integrated health services are made available for the sex workers, clients and other people. The beneficiaries of the programmes are empowered through capacity and leadership training. CAC-Nepal also undertakes local advocacy and networking as a means of securing the rights of women and children.

In 2004, with the support of PLAN International, programmes against the sexual exploitation of children specifically to protect and prevent

children from sexual exploitation were carried out. CAC-Nepal also undertook studies on internal trafficking among children and youth engaged in prostitution in partnership with ILO/IPEC.

Future strategy

CAC-Nepal hopes to expand its HIV and AIDS awareness activities and care and treatment programmes. To do so, there is a need for increased networking on a regional as well as a national and international level. Additional funding and sustainable programmes would need to be devised that would further aid the empowerment of the target groups.

Creating HIV/STIs awareness will only go so far, as the problem is far beyond the lack of information. In addition to public awareness, partner reduction as well as condom use negotiation will help to some extent.

Lessons learned

- Undertaking pre-project assessment survey is essential in order to understand the needs and aspirations of the target population.
- Stakeholders should be consulted and strong networks with community people established.
- Stakeholders networks at different levels should be built before the actual programme implementation begins.

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A female sex worker empowerment session. (Picture courtesy of CAC-Nepal)