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Report-Aids-Migration
MIGRANTS FALL VICTIM TO AIDS

By: Isabella Hiew

KUALA LUMPUR: The spread of AIDS in Africa, the cradle of humanity, began slowly but it picked up speed and fury when the virus reached sex workers who passed it on to workers on the move.

Analyses of frozen blood samples collected in the continent in the 1960s and 70s tell of how swiftly the disease can spread and the misery that it sows.

A National Geographic journal article reported that the infected prostitutes passed on the AIDS causing virus, HIV, to truckers who carried the disease to towns and villages, while air travellers ferried the virus to other continents.

This clearly shows that mobility and migration play a big role in the spread of AIDS.

MIGRANTS RISK INFECTION

Migration is widespread in this part of the world and countries that play hosts to migrant workers erroneously perceive that the AIDS virus cross borders with the migrants. This misconception may be partly due to the misrepresentation that AIDS is a "foreign" malady.

"AIDS researchers find that migrant workers, rather than being the transmitters, are at risk of being infected," says Sharuna Verghis, coordinator of Caram-Asia, a regional network of non-governmental organisations in South and South East Asia, with Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, involved in a regional action programme on AIDS and Mobility.

"The problem lies with governments who view migrants as economic tools rather than human beings who have social, emotional and sexual needs," she says.

HUMAN NEEDS

Many of the migrants are single and those who are married leave home without spouses, thus allowing them to form relationships or seek ways to fulfill their human needs, she says.

In a paper presented at the 12th World AIDS Congress in Geneva last year, Tenaganita director Irene Fernandez draws attention to a Caram-Asia research which observed that "people alone or partly homesick and in new surroundings often have increased sexual needs."

Tenaganita is Malaysia's representative in Caram-Asia.

"Among male migrant workers there is increased visiting of sex workers, increased casual sex...among female migrant workers, there is increased casual sex," the study found.

Verghis says that undocumented or illegal workers are at great risk because their situation automatically restricts their access to medical care in recipient countries.

"When health is compromised a person's vulnerability to diseases is higher," she says.

FIRST CLASS FEES, THIRD CLASS CARE

Migrants are also hesitant to seek medical treatment for fear of deportation if they are tested positive for certain infectious diseases, she adds.

"Sometimes sexually transmitted diseases can be easily treated, but if treatment is not sought in time they can predispose a person to other

infections," she adds.

This is compounded by the fact that migrants often live in deplorable conditions or are housed in containers.

Verghis claims that when migrants are hospitalised "they pay first class fees but receive third class treatment."

"In most cases the hospital fees are deducted from the workers salary and this deters them from seeking treatment," she alleges.

Fernandez says in her report that the majority of migrants cannot afford expensive medical fees.

"Employers are not willing to pay the high cost of treatment. Workers therefore resort to self-medication," the report claims.

LITTLE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HIV/AIDS

"Migrants have little information on health and HIV/AIDS when leaving their home countries and when they arrive in a foreign land, information is not accessible in their language," Verghis says.

Knowledge about AIDS and other infectious diseases empowers an individual to embrace safe practices in lifestyle, she says.

To make health information available there is a need for predeparture orientation programmes for the migrants. Currently, only the Philippines has some kind of organised predeparture programme.

Verghis says that the predeparture programmes should be complemented by post-arrival orientation and further education programmes integrated in the work place.

Knowledge about HIV/AIDS is low among most migrants and although Filipina maids are well-informed about the disease, prevention and risky behaviour, the decision to practise safe sex is left to the men, Fernandez says in her report.

The Caram-Asia research highlighted that among Bangladeshis, their migration patterns and movement created a conducive environment for sexual encounters among the migrant population or with the local community.

The study showed that the women are more concerned in protecting themselves against pregnancy rather than HIV/AIDS.

Verghis strongly feels that they must be informed about the dangers of HIV/AIDS and the predeparture and post-arrival orientation programmes.

"Knowledge on precautions and safe social behaviour will benefit the migrants as well as the society in the receiving and home countries because tackling the HIV/AIDS problem needs the participation of all stakeholders," she argues.

Governments must also be committed and Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's proposal for a summit among heads of government to discuss the HIV/AIDS problem at the recent International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) is timely. -- Bernama

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