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Empowering women to fight HIV/AIDS

By Sofianni Subki

A young sex worker's experience, as well as papers and workshops on gender discrimination, human rights abuses and practices to prevent the spreading of HIV/AIDS serve as an eye-opener for SOFIANNI SUBKI, who attended the first Asia Pacific Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS Best Practices Conference held in Islamabad, Pakistan.

BEJEWELLED and dressed in a sequined salwar kameez, pretty Kiran Zareen looks nothing like the stereotype exploited sex worker. She's only 23 but her heavily-kohlled eyes and knowing smile belie her age.

Born in one of the red light districts of Hyderabad in Pakistan, she's been a sex worker since she was 12. She earns between 35 and 40,000 Pakistani rupees (RM3,000 plus) a month, a lucrative income that gives her a comfortable lifestyle.

"I'm happy, but it will be difficult for me to find someone to accept and marry me," she said. "This is one of the disadvantages of the job."

But she is quick to point out that the bleak prospect of remaining single is nothing compared to the risk faced by sex workers due to the HIV/ AIDS scourge.

This is why she volunteers for the Greenstar Project, a government-supported venture that runs a clinic in Serey Ghat, the fourth largest red light district area in Pakistan.

The clinic functions as a resource centre that disseminates health and disease prevention messages. It is from here that Kiran, as well as five other sex workers, operate as peer outreach workers.

"As a peer worker, my duty is to spread knowledge about HIV/ AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the importance of using condoms to prevent it from spreading in our community," she said. "I teach other sex workers and also my clients."

On whether she intends to give up sex work in the future, she said: "No, I like my financial independence."

Kiran was one of the participants at the first Asia Pacific Women, Girls and HIV/ AIDS Best Practices Conference held in Islamabad, Pakistan recently. She was there to represent local sex workers as well as gain more knowledge HIV/AIDS and share her experience as a Greenstar peer outreach worker.

The three-day conference was a benchmark in terms of its content and issues as it was the first HIV/AIDS conference that focused on girls and women. It headlined current statistics that reflect the increased global feminisation of AIDS with more than half of those infected being women and girls.

International delegates of various fields and specialisations got together to share strategies, knowledge and best practices for the prevention and treatment of the epidemic. There were representatives from Malaysia, India, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia, Myanmar, Iran and the United Nations.

The conference, jointly organised by the Pakistani Government, Pakistan National AIDS Control Programme and non-governmental organisation AMAL Human Development, was launched by Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz.

He called on concerted and coordinated efforts by Asian countries to prevent HIV/ AIDS through health reforms, empowerment of their women and poverty alleviation.

Dr Nafis Sadik, special envoy to the UN secretary-general on HIV/AIDS,

was also present to deliver the key-note address. Later, a pre-recorded speech by Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, the president of the Malaysian AIDS Council, was shown via video.

The conference, which took place at the Islamabad Marriott Hotel, kicked off with a plenary session by the Pakistan National AIDS Control Programme manager Dr Asma Bukhari. Gender discrimination, human rights abuses and youth practices in preventing HIV/ AIDS were the main topics later addressed at various workshops.

The following day saw more workshops. Three were conducted by members of the Malaysian contingent.

Catherine Arumanayagam of the Women and Health Association of Kuala Lumpur talked about her experience running a half-way home for homeless and HIV/AIDS-positive female sex workers.

"Many sell their bodies to support their husbands' or boyfriends' drug habit," she said. "Many become drug users themselves to numb their senses, it's easier to do their jobs this way. Many give birth to children who are not issued birth certificates and therefore denied access to education.

"Sex workers are not educated about HIV/AIDS and STIs and do not have identification documents to have access to hospital treatment, which results in delayed health care. They are stigmatised, unable to get alternative jobs, thrown out of rented rooms and often end up homeless."

Fadzilah Abdul Hamid of Rumah Soleha in Malaysia presented a paper on HIV Positive Muslim Women: Care and Support Challenge. "Stigma and discrimination are prevalent in Malaysia, and particularly directed against Muslim women with HIV," she said. "There is a widespread belief that women are infected because they have been promiscuous, but the reality is that they are infected by their husbands."

Khartini Slamah of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers talked about the problems and discrimination faced by sex workers. Women isolated in brothels or hotels are prevented, or unable, to access information and services vital to their protection.

"It's not just about providing condoms, it's also providing information on how to use them," she said. "Sex workers need realistic work alternatives, they don't need any more sewing machines."

Globally, young women and girls are more susceptible to HIV than men or boys, with studies showing they can be 2.5 times more likely to be HIV-infected as their male counterparts. Their vulnerability is primarily due to inadequate knowledge about AIDS, insufficient access to HIV prevention services, inability to negotiate safer sex and a lack of female-controlled HIV prevention methods such as microbicides.

At the same time, all over the world, women do not enjoy the same rights and access to employment, property and education as men. Women and girls are also more likely to face sexual violence, which can accelerate the spread of HIV.

Around half of all people living with HIV in the world are female. This is why HIVpositive women have a unique and valuable role to play, in society and in fighting HIV/ AIDS. Women hold families and communities together and are a source of great strength in the face of HIV/AIDS.

(END) Source : New Straits Times