

Workplace programmes to target clients of sex workers

By Gita Lingga, Communications Officer, ILO Jakarta

BALI (ILO News): To highlight the need for increased coverage of interventions for clients of sex workers, most of whom are men in the workforce, the ILO took the opportunity of the 9th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) to organize a satellite session titled "Reaching Clients of Sex Workers through Workplace Interventions," on 12 August, 2009.

Chaired by Mr. Alan Boulton, Director of the ILO Office for Indonesia and Timor-Leste, the session stressed the importance and the impact of workplace programmes in economic sectors that employ large numbers of male workers known to engage in unprotected commercial sex. The session also brought together unions, sex workers, international organizations, and NGO representatives to further discuss effective interventions to reach clients of sex workers.

Ms. Jillian Ferguson, ILO project officer in Beijing said that the most vulnerable sectors with high numbers of clients of sex workers are fisheries, mining, transportation, agriculture and the armed forces. These are sectors with high levels of mobility, occupational stress and with workplaces located close to recreational areas.

Research indicates that 45 percent of surveyed seafarers in Indonesia had sex with a sex worker, while 70.3 percent of truck drivers in Papua New Guinea were found to pay for sex during the 12 months prior being interviewed. In addition, a study conducted in Yunnan, China, highlighted the need for HIV programmes targeting male mine workers. "This study found that 82.9 percent of all respondents had not used a condom during sex in the past six months. It also revealed that there was a poor level of knowledge about sexually transmitted infections and HIV," Ms. Ferguson added.

Dr. Asif Altaf, Global HIV/AIDS Coordinator of the International Transport Workers' Federation, said that some groups of workers are particularly more vulnerable to HIV infection because of their working and living conditions. "One of the most vulnerable sectors is the transportation sector. Thus, HIV/AIDS programmes should not only include workers involved in road transport but also other transport workers such as seafarers and tuk tuk drivers," he explained.

He also highlighted the important role of the workers' organizations in implementing HIV/AIDS programmes targeted to the transportation sector. Workers' organizations are in the best-position to deliver workplace programmes as workers' representatives can more easily address sensitive personal issues in relation to HIV. "Besides building mutual trust between workers and their organizations, using workers' organizations for implementing HIV programmes will be more effective in maintaining the sustainability and continuation of the activities after the discontinuation of funding," he said.

Voicing the aspiration of sex workers, Ms. Bharati Dey from DURBAR, an association representing 65,000 sex workers in India, highlighted the need for project interventions involving both sex workers and their clients. DURBAR has involved in a project where sex workers were providing counseling on sexually transmitted infections to their clients. "Most of the sex workers are aware of their vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections and of the importance of using a condom, but not the clients. That is why the counseling plays a key role to change the mind-set of the clients," she said.

"Targeted workplace programmes are, in fact, low cost and effective," said Mr. Richard Howard, Chief Technical Adviser of the ILO HIV/AIDS Workplace Education Programme in China. A targeted workplace programme conducted by the ILO with Yunxi Group, the biggest mining company in Geiju, China, has been successfully implemented. He said that the programme has led to an increase in workers' awareness of the three modes of transmission from 58.5 to 84.8 percent. Condom use rose from 49 to 73 percent, and the number of workers demonstrating positive attitudes towards people living with HIV from 7.6 to 54.9 percent.

The final speaker, Mr. Sachin Gupte from Family Health International (FHI) presented the Aastha project, aiming at reducing the incidence of HIV and sexually transmitted infections among sex workers and their partners with behaviour change strategies, screening and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, condom promotion and distribution as well as community mobilization. "The project involves bar managers and brothels owners to gain regular access to sex workers. Yet, reaching their regular partners remains a challenge," he added. (*)