

Reaching out to sex workers and their clients

The ILO Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS and the World of Work, 2010 (No. 200) reaches out to all workers. In collaboration with constituents and partners, the ILO promotes the inclusion of female and male sex workers and their clients in HIV responses at the international, national, sectoral and workplace levels. ILO is looking beyond traditional HIV prevention efforts and attempts to tackle the underlying factors that enhance risks of HIV infection. Reducing stigma and discrimination, promoting economic empowerment of women and men and addressing gender dimensions are key components of this approach.

Addressing HIV vulnerabilities of sex workers

Across all countries and all regions, sex workers are one of the groups most affected by HIV and AIDS, with HIV infection rates much higher than those of the general population. The vulnerability of sex workers to HIV infection—whether female, male or transgender sex workers—is compounded by attitudes of stigma and discrimination in many countries, where those engaging in sex work are marginalized and often face abuse and violence. They also often face barriers in accessing HIV-related services. Additional factors such as poverty and gender inequality compound their risk of HIV infection.

ILO initiatives addressing sex workers and their clients aim to reduce HIV vulnerability through economic empowerment, promotion of safety in and through the workplace, and increasing access to social protection, including HIV care and treatment for both sex workers and their clients.

The ILO Recommendation on HIV and AIDS (No. 200) covers both sex workers and their clients:

Recommendation No. 200 covers all workers working under all forms or arrangements at all workplaces, including in any employment or occupation and in all sectors of economic activity, including the formal and informal economies (paragraph 2).

Workplaces are defined as any place in which workers perform their activity and workers include persons working under any form or arrangement (paragraph 1).

Recommendation No. 200 calls for measures to be taken in and through the workplace to facilitate access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services for workers, their families and dependents (paragraph 3).

The ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111):
Convention No. 111 provides for equal employment opportunities for all men and women workers.

Working with sex workers and their clients

Clients of sex workers are present in all economic sectors and occupations. Some segments of the economy may be more vulnerable to HIV infection than others due to their living and working conditions.

ILO seeks to strengthen HIV prevention for clients of sex workers by providing support for the development and implementation of HIV workplace policies and programmes in key sectors. Examples include the following:

- In 2010-11, the ILO conducted studies to assess the HIV vulnerabilities of long-distance truck drivers based in Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay. The study used quantitative surveys designed in consultation with truck drivers and sex workers. The results of the study showed the need for targeted HIV prevention with condom provision as an essential component of the HIV response in the transport sector in South America.
- In Guyana, ILO is collaborating with a local organization of sex workers, One Love, to reach clients in the logging and mining sectors. HIV prevention services will aim to reduce HIV vulnerability of local sex workers and their clients.
- In India, ILO is implementing HIV programmes with trade unions to cover workers in the construction sector. Trade unions work in close collaboration with NGOs implementing HIV programmes with sex workers around construction sites.
- In China, ILO has implemented programmes with internal migrant workers for HIV prevention and has developed communication tools in partnership with the private sector.

Promising results of initiatives for economic empowerment of sex workers:

Sex workers learn business skills in new community-based ILO project in Thailand

When San, a sex worker in Bangkok, was given the opportunity to participate in a pilot business skills training scheme, she was very enthusiastic. She wanted to put her idea of setting up a bakery into practice. "I've always enjoyed baking and so I was interested in starting a part-time baking business to add to my income from sex work," she said. San started a bakery in Samut Sakhorn and hopes one day she can employ staff to help her expand.

The ILO is offering Community-based Enterprise Development (C-BED) training to sex workers. C-BED is a tool that builds the capacity of current or aspiring entrepreneurs. "C-BED empowers vulnerable groups, including sex workers and HIV-positive people, to improve their means of income generation," says Richard Howard, ILO Senior Specialist for HIV/AIDS in the Asia and Pacific region. "Economic empowerment can support sex worker efforts to negotiate for better, safer working conditions free of violence and harassment and with improved access to health services, including HIV prevention, treatment and care."

Empower Foundation and other similar groups in Thailand have been calling on the government and development agencies to address the economic vulnerability of sex workers and to create access to additional forms of income generation. The C-BED training addresses this gap through a low cost, innovative methodology that emphasizes the value of recognizing and sharing community knowledge.

UNAIDS Country Coordinator, Michael Hahn, welcomes the project. He said: "This is a really good example of an activity designed and implemented with the full participation of sex workers. The business skills they gain will help widen their choices about how they best want to shape their lives and their futures." ILO plans to roll out C-BED in partnership with sex worker organizations in Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam and Sri Lanka over the next two years. It aims to reach more than 2,000 sex workers by end 2013.

Backing young entrepreneurs in Malawi helps reduce HIV risk

Alice Mboma is a 28 year old sex worker living in the northern Karonga district of Malawi. Her clients sometimes refuse to pay or threaten her with violence and she hardly makes enough to get by. She received entrepreneurial training under the ILO project which is collaborating with the Karonga Cargo Association (KACA), a group representing about 4,000 mostly young bicycle taxi riders. These bicycle riders operate in the busy M1 highway border area between northern Malawi and Tanzania. Bicycles are the main form of transport for informal workers in the area, but their work puts the taxi riders at risk because many customers are sex workers or traders who are so poor they often want to pay with sex rather than cash.

Alice Mboma has been given a leadership role representing the sex workers in KACA and was also selected by the group to become a trainer. Fired up with entrepreneurial ideas, she saved money from sex work to start a small business trading pots and rice with village farmers. She made enough profit to open her own bank account - something she had never dreamed would be possible. "I am so proud of this," she says. "I cannot completely quit sex work yet but I have reduced the number of clients I meet. I hope our lives will change completely."

"There is a need to look beyond traditional HIV prevention efforts to also tackle the underlying factors that lead to risk-taking behaviour," explains Patrick Makondesa, ILO/AIDS National Project Coordinator based in Malawi. "We believe that if young men and women are economically empowered, it will reduce their vulnerability."

With funding from Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the project uses ILO training tools to help KACA improve its organization and to enhance the business development skills of its members. The project has so far trained 54 master trainers who have in turn taught business development skills to 500 others.

KACA decided to include the sex worker networks in its organization. "Membership secretary" Rodgers Simwanza says that new people are coming every day as news of the ILO project gives them hope of change. The taxi riders actively encourage their customers to join and full membership has now reached 7000.



Implement the ILO Recommendation on
HIV and AIDS (No. 200)

Prevent HIV,
Protect Human Rights at Work

