

Book Review 'Estimating the Number of Sex Workers in Malaysia'

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Written by Dr. Sabitha Marican dan Dr. Mahmood Nazar Mohamed, the purpose of this book is to estimate the number of sex workers, and identify the risk of HIV/AIDS epidemic. Meanwhile this book will also provide some demographic information pertaining to the respondents, their knowledge towards HIV/AIDS, safe practises and their behaviours that put them at risk to contract HIV/AIDS. Since 2004, it has been noted that there have been increasing trends in sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS in Malaysia. However, there were less data and information which could thoroughly explain the epidemiological changes. According to studies from other countries, there is strong evidence linking sex workers and HIV/AIDS epidemic. Therefore, it is very important to do more studies on sex workers, their risk behaviours, and what roles this high risk group may have been playing in the increasing trends of sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS in Malaysia.

The sex industry although a significant economic sector in many countries, is also generally illegal. Some countries provide a multitude of assistance and aid to sex workers mostly through civil societies and NGOs for the purpose of fulfilling their health, well-being and safety, and more importantly to curb the spread of communicable diseases such as STDs and AIDA. Some countries instituted laws against the industry and labelling it as a social or moral problem. Strict consequences and penalties are imposed to the sex workers, some provide rehabilitation which is usually social or spiritual-based.

It is a known fact that sex workers have been among the most vulnerable groups to diseases and due to the nature of their profession, they have also been the most neglected. Stigma and discrimination, criminalization, limited access to health services and information, as well as exploitation and violence, exacerbate this vulnerability. It is to this concern that it has attracted many scientists to study and provide some solutions to the present predicament.

In 2005, a total of 38.6 million people (high-low estimates are 33.4 to 46.0 million) are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS as compared

to 36.2 million in 2003. The AIDS epidemic in Asia is also expanding rapidly. This is more evident with sharp increases in HIV infections in China, Indonesia and Vietnam. An estimated 7.4 million people are living with HIV in the region and 1.1 million people became newly infected last year alone - more than any year before. Home to 60% of the world's population, the fast-growing Asian epidemic has huge implications globally.

In Asia, the AIDS epidemic remains largely concentrated among injecting drug users, men who have sex with men, sex workers, clients of sex workers and their immediate sexual partners. Effective prevention coverage in these groups is inadequate, partly because of stigma and discrimination. UNAIDS reported that some Asian countries such as Thailand and Cambodia, which have chosen to tackle openly high-risk behaviour, such as sex work, have been more successful in fighting the spread of HIV as shown by the reduction in infection rates among sex workers.

Commercial sex presents far higher risks than casual sex simply because the numbers involved are far higher. A man who has several girlfriends a year is in a far lower risk bracket than a man who regularly visits a sex worker, who herself may have had 50 clients in just one week. Two factors a said to be very important in AIDS epidemics associated with sex workers are the numbers of clients per sex worker (in a day or week) and the frequency of men visiting sex workers. The first determines how intense (if at all) the initial burst of new infections among sex workers and clients will be. The second determines how widely HIV will spread in the general population. In Thailand and Cambodia, before the AIDS epidemics, sex workers had several times more clients on average than in Indonesia and the Philippines. Similarly, more men were frequenting sex workers. Of course, other factors also influence the epidemic, such as condom use and treatment of Sexually Transmitted Infection. However, the greatest risks come not from sex workers but from the unsafe conditions they work in.

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