STI/HIV/AIDS Programs With Vulnerable Groups

OVERVIEW

Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs), Injecting Drug Users, Men who have Sex with Men, truckers, and migrant workers have long been blamed for bridging HIV into the general population, making them targets for interventions as “high-risk” groups. While historically many programs have provided information and condoms, and in some cases harm reduction services (like needle exchanges), few have employed participatory approaches, addressed public policies and social factors fueling the epidemic, and built capacity of associations of vulnerable populations. High rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among many of these groups, overwhelming stigma that discourages health-seeking behavior, and deeply entrenched social inequalities increase their vulnerability to contracting and spreading HIV.

STI and HIV/AIDS programs with vulnerable groups must recognize the totality of individuals and not just their sexual or drug use behavior, moving beyond condom social marketing to include advocacy, harm reduction, capacity building, community development and sensitization, and nurturing of enabling environmental factors. Pathfinder believes programs with vulnerable groups should:

• Enhance the active participation of members of vulnerable groups in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of interventions, thereby promoting group empowerment and project ownership;
• Sensitize healthcare providers, the police, and the society at large to begin to destigmatize sex work and other controversial behaviors, such as drug use;
• Conduct advocacy and policy activities to enlist the support of governments, policy makers, brothel owners, and community organizations;
• Build the capacity of vulnerable groups and associations in social mobilization, project management, and advocacy as a way to diversify funding sources and ensure the sustainability of interventions;
• Address underlying conditions that make people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, such as poverty, limited literacy, gender inequality, sexual exploitation, and harmful traditional beliefs and practices;
• Conduct behavior change communication activities that address both social and individual changes;
• Offer holistic services, such as childcare, income generation and linkages to micro-credit, support groups, and legal assistance, and not just services that focus on a person’s risky behaviors;
• Include outreach services, such as peer education, satellite or outpost clinics, and drop-in centers;
• Form support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS and provide training in home-based care.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PATHFINDER’S STI/HIV/AIDS PROJECTS WITH VULNERABLE GROUPS

• **Targeted Interventions for Groups at Risk (TIGRIS): India**
Pathfinder, through the Gates funded Avahan Initiative, is implementing the TIGRIS Project in the Pune metropolitan area and 10 other districts of Maharashtra, India. TIGRIS aims to decrease STI prevalence rates, increase HIV/AIDS awareness and treatment seeking behavior, and strive for
100 percent condom use among sex workers, their partners, and their clients through STI diagnosis and treatment, HIV education and prevention, and behavior change programs. A network of clinics has been established in brothel and non-brothel neighborhoods in Pune and throughout the project areas. Drop-in centers have been established in most project sites where sex workers can rest, meet together, and receive satellite clinic services. The project has trained providers, non-governmental organization (NGO) staff, and peer educators, provided ongoing supervisions, and has supported facility upgrades for preferred providers working with vulnerable groups in 10 districts. Clinic-based activities are complemented by community-based outreach activities with sex workers, clients of sex workers, madams, and brothel owners, implemented by partner NGOs and sex worker associations. The project also seeks to create enabling environments, within which behavior change can occur and build the capacity of sex workers’ associations.

- **NGO Service Delivery Project: Bangladesh**
  NGOs throughout rural and urban Bangladesh provide diagnosis and treatment of STIs at static and satellite clinics through the NGO Service Delivery Project (NSDP). Selected NSDP NGOs provide STI services for vulnerable groups, such as truckers, rickshaw pullers, sex workers, and dock laborers, in coordination with AIDS-prevention programs supported by USAID. Special satellite clinic sessions and community mobilization activities are held for vulnerable groups at truck and bus stands, halting points along the India-Bangladesh border, boat terminals, and in slums. NSDP collaborates with CARE International to conduct HIV/AIDS work and coordinates with other HIV/AIDS efforts in Bangladesh.

- **Interventions with Commercial Sex Workers: Brazil**
  Pathfinder collaborated with the Brazilian Network of Commercial Sex Workers (BNCSW) by supporting the publication of newsletters and booklets addressing issues related to sexual and human rights and HIV/AIDS prevention. Also, with support from private funds, Pathfinder assisted BNCSW in conducting its 2004-2005 strategic planning exercise. In Bahia, Pathfinder aimed to increase the capacity of APRO SBA, an association of CSWs, to address the vulnerability of CSWs to HIV/AIDS. Activities included training CSWs as peer educators, developing HIV/AIDS educational materials, prioritizing issues such as safe sex, negotiation skills, condom use, and sexual violence, and establishing referral networks with health, legal, and social systems. Pathfinder recently began another program for CSWs in the border towns of Foz do Iguacu and Corumbá.

  In 2004 Pathfinder was selected to partner with the Bahia State Health Secretariat in the implementation of the State HIV/AIDS Plan of Action and Goals. Pathfinder is involved in the management of the civil society component, which implements prevention and care projects through HIV/AIDS NGOs working with vulnerable groups. In 2004 and 2005 Pathfinder has provided managerial and technical support to a total of 38 NGO projects, 10 with people living with HIV/AIDS, three with female sex workers, five with men who have sex with men, five with transgender, eight with adolescents, six with women, and one focusing on harm reduction with drug users.

- **Improving STI/HIV/AIDS Services: A Model Program of Public-Private Collaboration: Viet Nam**
  With funding from Pfizer Foundation, Pathfinder has initiated an innovative project linking the public and private sectors for more effective HIV/AIDS prevention and support. Pathfinder has developed high-quality STI services and trained public and private providers to provide CSWs and other vulnerable populations with accessible, sensitive clinical care including STI enhanced syndromic management, counseling, condom promotion, and referral for voluntary counseling and testing and other HIV services. The project has also trained facility providers in broad HIV counseling to better care for AIDS patients and their families.

**For more Information, Contact:**
Alden Dillow, HIV/AIDS Technical Associate
Pathfinder International
Email: ADillow@pathfind.org

Pathfinder International
www.pathfind.org • info@pathfind.org