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National Consultation on HIV & Sex Work

'FSWs must be empowered to control the spread of HIV'

Staff Report

KARACHI: The two day National Consultation on HIV & Sex Work jointly organised by the United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA) and National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) with a sizeable representation from the female sex worker (FSW) community concluded on Wednesday.

The consultation was held to review the current scenario with regards to HIV/AIDS in Pakistan as well as to see how the female sex workers were coping. The meeting was convened after a recent independently conducted UNFPA study, 'HIV & Sex Work: Situation & Response Analysis in Pakistan', revealed various shortcomings and challenges in the current HIV/AIDS prevention programs.

The two day event focused on areas that need immediate attention

with regards to sex work. The event saw a strong participation from FSWs, outreach workers along with NGOs, UN agencies and experts.

Though Pakistan is a low prevalence high risk country, there is concentrated epidemic amongst the injecting drug users (IDUs). Although the numbers of HIV female sex workers remain minuscule, the fear that the intermingling of IDUs with other high risk groups including FSW, men who have sex with men (MSM), truckers and hijras will result in a deteriorating situation.

On the course of two days, various facts and figures were taken into account while first hand experiences from the field workers were also heard, giving a deeper insight into lives and issues faced by FSWs. One of the highlights of the consultation was to evolve a strategy to empower the sex workers in order to prevent the spread of HIV within the FSW

population as well as other groups.

Gender and Reproductive Health Forum's Mirza Alim Baig said that it was a good idea to get the FSWs together on a platform for future strategy, adding, "We have to empower the FSW community to carry on with the task of safeguarding themselves against this infection." He and many of the participants directly working in the field were of the opinion that FSW were in a vulnerable position not only physically and sexually but mentally as well. "We don't want charity or alms. All we want is respect as human beings," said a FSW working for an NGO as an outreach worker.

UNAIDS Pakistan Senior National Programme Officer Dr Samia Hashim said that the two day consultation was a good step. "People had a chance to interact with the FSW community and the feedback from both sides has been immense.

However, an analysis of the situation to date was missing and had it been there, it would have given us an idea about how to go about things in the future." Talking about the HIV prevention approach, she said, "Given Pakistan's diversity in terms of culture and society, varied approaches are needed. A single specialized approach would not do much good."

Talking to Daily Times, UNFPA representative Daniel B Baker said, "From this consultation, two things came to fore. One, there are projects but with limited scope. Secondly, the number of sex workers is high and we are not able to reach out to every one." He said that it was about that Pakistan considers involving the wives and long term partners of men availing the services of FSW and MSM in order to prevent the spread of HIV.

In his concluding remarks, NACP's Hasan Abbas Zaheer said,

"It's been a good experience as everybody here got a chance to voice their opinions especially the female sex workers," adding that the FSW community should be empowered to see a lasting impact of HIV prevention programmes. Also present on the occasion were Family Health International's Dr Naseer Nazamani, UNFPA's Dr Safdar Kamal Pasha, UNICEF's Bettina Schunter and Shukriya Gul, an HIV positive lady who is now actively working for the uplift of people living with HIV/AIDS. The participants were of the opinion that capacity building of FSWs as well as measures to curb stigmatisation should be put into use. They also opined that HIV testing with referrals and services should be prioritised. Further consultations in this regard with other partners are also planned in the near future to chalk out a strong strategy for controlling HIV in Pakistan.