

AIDS and Migrant Workers

by Maurice Bloem and Dilruba Karim

Migrant workers often fall between gaps of countries prevention and intervention programmes. The situation of some migrant workers may lead to potential exposure to risk due to lack of access to information and health care

ALL participants at this conference seem to agree that AIDS is not a health problem, but a developmental problem," says Professor Ivan Wolffers of the Free University in Amsterdam during one of the Satellite Symposia at the Third International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific that was held from 17-21 September in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Wolffers continues: "Why is it then, as stated by a former director of the WHO Jonathan Mann, that 90 per cent of all research fund goes to medical research and only 10 per cent to social research?"

According to the World Health Organisation HIV/AIDS will disseminate rapidly in Asia and in the year 2000 the majority of HIV-infected people will be found in that continent (in the first place India, Thailand and Myanmar, but also Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Bangladesh and South China).

It is difficult to visualize the devastating effect of the HIV epidemic within our lifetimes and beyond. Thirteen million people in the world are infected with HIV and the number is increasing by 5000 every day. Also Bangladesh will not be spared.

Again Wolffers: "The dilemma we are facing with our theme 'AIDS and migration' is on the one hand the importance of giving more attention to the relation be-

tween the two, but on the other hand we are faced with the dangers of connecting these two issues too much, because it will reinforce undesirable associations between the two. We do not want to see migrants as carriers of HIV. We have to see them as human beings put into extra risk behavior for getting HIV, because of their specific situation they have to live in. Hence, their basic human rights and workers' welfare are often neglected. Most important of all, their sexual identities are completely overlooked by the authorities (government and employers), which adds to the situation."

The NGO Tenaganita from Malaysia together with the Department of Social Medicine of the Free University in Amsterdam are the initiators of an action oriented research programme on HIV/AIDS and mobility. Tenaganita became well-known, because of their reporting on abuse, torture and dehumanized treatment of migrant workers (mainly from the Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh) at the Malaysian detention camps.

"Migrant workers are often blamed for the spread of the virus, but our research tries to highlight the poor health situation of the work-

ers," according to Irene Fernandez of Tenaganita. Her sister, Aegle Fernandez explained about the findings of a research on Filipino housemaids who are often graduates taking up jobs overseas. According to the Malaysian magazine 'The Sun' at least seventy per cent of the new graduates in the Philippines find jobs in other countries. Fernandez: "After we established a good relationship with the maids, we came to know many things. All of them had heard about AIDS, but none could explain something about it. Condoms were not seen as protection against HIV/AIDS. The maids also stated that they would not wear a condom if they trusted their partner. They also did not have any clue about the fact that they were tested on HIV both in the Philippines and in Malaysia. Testing is mandatory for migrant workers in Malaysia and should be repeated every time the worker's contract has to be extended." (Authors: Most AIDS activists recognize the rights of indi-

viduals not to be subjected to compulsory and mandatory HIV testing). Sharuna of the same Malaysian NGO reported on a study done with Bangladeshi workers. Apparently, the interaction between the (mostly single) Bangladeshi males and the local women is quite present.

The Malaysian women told Tenaganita that they get involved with these men, because they find them very handsome, good lovers and of unhappiness with their present Malaysian husbands. The reasons for the relationship as expressed by the Bangladeshi men were a little different. "We have a high sexual drive which we must satisfy. Otherwise, we will go crazy." Further, they are also involved with female migrant workers from Bangladesh and Indonesia, and with commercial sex workers (CSW).

Having sex is synonymous with penetration. "Masturbation will make the body weak," according to the Bangladeshi workers. They further stated that they never

use a condom, as it does not give them real fulfillment.

Nevertheless, the action oriented research also includes HIV/AIDS education and seems to pay off. Already during the research, the Bangladeshi workers stated that they had reduced their visits to the CSWs and started using condoms. "But, we want more information on sexuality and safe-sex techniques."

The interviewed Bangladeshi female workers often denied that they had sexual intercourse with their Bangladeshi male colleagues. Unfortunately, in the short period of their research, Tenaganita also heard from these female workers that eight of their female colleagues were sent back to Bangladesh, because they were found HIV positive. When we faced the chairperson of the NAC with this latter information during a meeting of the AIDS and Health Writers Group, he told us that he had no knowledge of this and considered it therefore as incorrect.

In the view of many peo-

ple, HIV/AIDS could only be brought to their communities from outside. The truth is that the HIV virus does not discriminate between insiders and outsiders. Though some groups in the world, like the migrant workers, live under such circumstances that they are at bigger risk to get infected, every person is a potential HIV-host. Therefore, we will only be able to do something effective against HIV/AIDS if we see it as a global challenge and a communal threat.

Testing of outsiders, like it is done in Malaysia and the United States (migrant workers, foreigners) is often considered as a strategy for identifying the "foreigner" who comes to the country and might bring HIV/AIDS. However, in practice this shows to be inappropriate and not effective. For example, the United States tested 321,300 people who applied for a green card. Of them 426 appeared to be HIV positive. That does not seem to be a major threat for a country

with more than 1 million HIV-positive people. Fortunately, more and more people realize that what matters is not to find people who are infected, but to influence the behavior of the whole population.

The virus is not transmitted when people only sit next to each other. The modes of transmission are known: through unprotected sexual contact, through contaminated blood (transfusions or injecting drug use) and from a HIV-positive mother to her child during pregnancy, birth or lactation. Programmes making sure that people start changing their risk behaviour seems most rational. These interventions can only be successful if we have a well-informed understanding of the dynamics of migration and HIV/AIDS. Why are migrant workers often involved in high risk behaviour? What are their concepts about sex and sexuality? What is their knowledge in relation to HIV/AIDS?

Migrant workers often fall between gaps of countries prevention and intervention programmes. The situation of some migrant workers may lead to potential exposure to risk due to lack of access to information and health care; difficulties in comprehending prevention messages, be-

cause of language difficulties, but more importantly because of profoundly different understanding and approaches to sexuality or to relationships between the sexes; particularities in living conditions, for example, because of legal restrictions on family reunification, which may favour sexual relationships; and social and economic conditions. The example of the work of Tenaganita shows that participatory action research can trigger off behavioral change. The participants of this workshop agreed that the problem of AIDS and migration should be addressed at least regionally. A steering committee with NGO representatives of Bangladesh, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, and the Mekong countries was formed in an effort to come to a proper response to tackle the challenge as stated by Wolffers: "HIV/AIDS is becoming a threat to all of us, but special attention should be given to migrant workers since they are more vulnerable to the virus."

Maurice Bloem and Dilruba Karim are presently working for the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB). Maurice Bloem is further known for his activities as a member of the STD/AIDS Network Bangladesh and the AIDS and Health Writers Group Bangladesh. The content of this article is written in full personal responsibility of both authors.

Retirement : Longing for Love and Care

by Jerome Sarkar

TIME and tide wait for none: Between the beginning (birth) and the end (death) of life, there are many other beginnings and winding up of things from the outset of life till death. Among all these, retirement from service pinches most. As that dreadful date nears, we are sapped of the pep faster than usual. The process of retirement per se sets in infirmity in us. It should not be ignored that a few of us face the same bravely and have proven that with alive sense of humour and warmth, one can be very much youthful in the typified retirement. This in turn has spurred some to delve into the subject and we are lucky to get very valuable answers to our inquisitiveness.

STILL CAPABLE (active habits keep one capable for a long time): As reported in the journals, the geriatric research has revealed that men and women retain their creative faculties up to 68-70 years of age. It is also observed that some people do remain physically, mentally fit and creative beyond this margin. Of course, they are exceptions. In the light of life expectancy, average capabilities and adequacy, as a matter of policy, the government, other corporations and big companies fix the age of retirement which often varies from place to place and country to country even organisation to organisation. Many a times it is the social and economic pressure which is the guiding force to set an age of retirement with a view to accommodate upcoming generation for changes and more creative output. It is therefore not true that a man or a woman retires because he or she is no more productive or creative. Thus the set system pushes out many capable persons from their regular jobs.

DAMPENED SPIRIT (break of routine disrupts system): Usually, the retirement dampens the spirits of a person and gives way to agony. All of a sudden it halts life, declares one useless and unwanted. The living turns painful and bumpy.

The immediate effect of retirement attributes to a disruption of a long-practised routine, stoppage of salaries, socially looked-down upon, loneliness etc. Over and above, the sudden change of regular activities makes a retiree feel mentally depressed and physically ill from idleness and solitude. The attitudinal changes in the younger generations and their shrug-off manners further deteriorates the living of a retired soul. As a result, life becomes cumbersome, boring and demoralising.

STILL CREATIVE (infusion of knowledge and experiences generate creativity): People forget that many retirees remain physically fit, lively and full of vigour. They are able to perform work as perfectly as any young man or woman. Capitalising his or her vast experiences a retired person can contribute enormously to the cause of the community or humanity. Practical experiences blended with vast knowledge may produce marvelous results. Of the great men, many created their great works in this age.



Some retired persons do make valuable contributions to the society in different forms. They pass their time in writing on issues of national and international interests, get involved in social work, serve as adviser or consultant in companies or organisations, etc. Again, many others who are flabbergasted due to lack of opportunities and exposure of their potentialities, suffer from utter disappointment. If these talents could be properly channelised, it would bring greater benefits to the community. Besides, an organised move to exploit the talents and services of these persons will prevent sheer wastage of talents and creativity that have been achieved over many years and by investments in the form of trainings.

WESTERN INFLUENCE (we follow the west blindly, often giving up our good traditions): In imitating the western world, in our society too, many a son forms exclusively separate families leaving parents. And many with hectic schedules seem to be unable to pay any attention to their parents. While we have been following the western trends, they are gradually realising that this mechanical life has brought them many evils which are pinching deep inside their skins. Baby-

sitters are churning many irreparable damages to their children. On the other hand, the elderly people are languishing in the homes exclusively meant for the helpless elders. This has entailed social problems that they are now finding difficult to handle.

In one encounter at a home for the elderly people in the United States, I saw for myself how pathetically the inmates long for love, affection and caring. A few words of compassion and mere touches seemed to mean a lot. On the other hand, many teens landed in the houses of mentally disabled have lost mental equilibrium at the absence of the regular parents beside them and lack of caring and reaching out from their kith and kin.

BANGLADESHI TRADITION (a reservoir of warmth, affection, mutual respect, camaraderie and cordiality): In Bangladesh, the traditional value system is not yet defunct. In our families, we still respect and care for the elders. Whatever educated and well-groomed the children may be, in times of troubles and travails, they seek advices and blessings of the elderly members of the family. Socially too, the elderly people are always given the higher seats. They are like umbrellas over the

younger generations.

In the warmth of the grandchildren, the grandpas or grandmas enjoy living and in the safe folds of the grandpas and grandmas, the grandchildren grow into real human beings. The saying goes that "blood is thicker". And it is practically true. It is reported that the children who are lucky to bask in the warmth of the grandparents are more matured and confident than those who grow in care of nannies and servants or maids.

Directly or indirectly the grandpas and the grandmas render invaluable support to the family. In the recent past too, the retirement meant giving up the regular drudgeries of life and engaging in more serene living like, attending prayers sessions, visiting grown-up independent sons and daughters, close relatives providing them encouragement, valuable advices, spending spare times with the grandchildren making them aware of the traditions, cultures and arts of the region. In our country, the ladies in the familyline have always received special care of their parents and mother-in-laws. Their presence in the family generates the sense of togetherness and is a source of joy.

GOVERNMENT'S ROLE: It is true that there are some

retired elderly persons who need special attention of the government, the community and the capable establishments because they do not have any near and dear ones to look after them. They require financial support. The responsibility lies with the government as well as the community. Particularly, the established businessmen, the professionals and the industrialists should come forward to establish homes, clinics and hospitals, not driven by the purely profitable ventures but with charitable notion. There is no denying that in the neighbouring country — India — the established business houses have generously contributed towards the healthcare, shelter and food of the poor and elderly persons. Regrettably, we are yet to see such generosity in Bangladesh.

COMMITTED BENEVOLENCE OF THE AFFLUENT: I recall meeting a team of Danish visitors in the aftermath of 1988 flood in Dhaka. They paid visits to different parts of Dhaka city. Referring to the huge donations pouring into the country from foreign agencies, the visitors were anxious to know what the rich people of Dhaka came forward with, to alleviate the suffering of their own people. We used to hear about 22 rich families during the Pakistan time, now we hear that the number has risen to at least a hundred. What is their contribution to the society? How long should we hear the ear deafening tirades of the leaders (usually the wealthy persons) belonging both to the position and the opposition?

ONUS LIES WITH THE GOVERNMENT: The initiative should come from the government and it is primary responsibility of the government to look after the elderly and the poor. The opposition also has the responsibility to criticise the government constructively which will make the government contribute positively and the people to consider opposition worthy. While the government and the opposition are arguing, it is in their own interests, neglecting the interests of the mass.

Agreed that all of us are neglected but the most neglected section of the society is the elderly people.

Drug Law Targets 'Fat' Bank Accounts

by Charles Akin Ogunrinde, Lagos

AFTER years of lip-service and worldwide ridicule, Nigeria's military rulers are fighting the growing narcotics trade with new-found zeal.

The offensive is signalled by the signing of a 'Money Laundering Decree' — a sweeping law which empowers Nigeria's six-year-old National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) to place any bank account under watch.

Banks must report to the NDLEA in writing, within seven days, any single transaction in excess of N500,000 or its equivalent by an individual and N2 million or its equivalent by a corporate body.

Also transfers to or from a foreign country of security funds worth more than \$10,000 must be reported to the Central Bank of Nigeria by banks or other similar agencies.

In anticipation of protests from the banks, the law states that "banking secrecy shall not be invoked as a reason for objecting to the measures" set out.

Yet bankers are hinging their objections precisely on the professional principle of secrecy. They fear that genuine clients may get caught up in the web of the law aimed primarily at drug peddlers.

According to the President of the Chartered Institute of Bankers of Nigeria (CIBN), Femi Ekundayo: "The routine disclosure or routine rendition of returns would be considered as violating the general principle of confidentiality between a bank and its customers."

Such information, he warns, may "fall into the hands of trivial people."

An investment consultant, who asked not to be named, says the new law has loopholes: "Desperate banks can evade the penalties by devising means of splitting transactions worth more than the specified limits into smaller bits."

Penalties for breaching the law include a minimum jail term of 10 years for individ-

uals and a fine of N1 million for banks and similar agencies.

Objections to the new law will not be limited to the bankers in the long run, says a Lagos lawyer, Grace Udin: "There are at least three other provisions of the decree that threaten individual rights."

These, she explains, are the sections which empower the NDLEA to "place under surveillance or tap any telephone line; have access to any computer system and obtain communication of any authentic instrument or private contract."

NDLEA is enforcing the new law despite the mounting criticism.

Under the leadership of Major-General Musa Bama, the NDLEA has invoked relevant sections of the law to seal up several car dealerships in Lagos. It is suspected that the dealers' stock of brand new limousines and exotic used cars were acquired with proceeds from the narcotics trade.

As if to confirm the suspicion, the car dealers have gone underground, abandoning their premises to fierce-looking soldiers who now guard the sealed properties.

One of the dealers in hiding claims that the car business is actually controlled by the big importers. "The Lagos-based Thisday newspaper reported him asking: 'What has the NDLEA done about these other people?'"

But Bama's hardline is that until the car dealers come forward to clarify the sources of their invested funds, their business premises will remain sealed.

"Unless we confiscate the assets of the drug barons, they will not be crippled," says Bama.

Despite bankers' protests that the new offensive will cause lower deposits and less foreign investment Bama says the law makes economic sense.

"Without the law," he says, "we will have a lot of prob-

lems, particularly with the industries. A lot of our industries are not functioning because these money launderers bring a lot of finished goods into the country (for sale) and the local industries cannot compete with these imported goods.

"This is money laundering. It is how drug barons and their supporters attempt to legalise their illegal proceeds and this has to be stopped."

The new law reinforces the initiative of voluntary anti-drug crusaders like the Christ Against Drug Abuse Ministry (CADAM).

CADAM's co-ordinator, Dr Deji Adedeji, a physician, says: "The surprise is that among the growing army of narcotics addicts in Nigeria are the pilots who fly us, the doctors who treat us, the driver who moves us around and even the teachers to whom we entrust our kids."

There were more than 200 arrests in the first half of this year, these arrests are only a tip of the iceberg as hundreds of drug dealers escape the law.

The tell-tale signs of the booming narcotics trade in Lagos are evidenced by the increase of wealthy jobless people.

Mostly in their thirties, they drive costly cars, dress luxuriously and drink choice wines.

In disdain of this class of people, Lagosians now dismiss a business dominated by drug peddlers as "Cocaine Avenue," a coinage for "Allen Avenue - its real name."

Adedeji says everyone ought to enlist in the battle against narcotic trafficking and abuse, adding it is "dangerous" to see the narcotics menace as "a distant problem" affecting only out-casts.

— Gemini News

Exchange rate : US\$1=N\$4
Charles Akin Ogunrinde is News Editor of the National Concord in Lagos, which was forced to close by the Nigerian government.

17.2 pc school children in Lanka alcohol addict

COLOMBO, Oct 7: An alarming 17.2 per cent of school children have been found to be addicted to alcohol according to a survey conducted by the alcohol and drug information centre (ADIC), reports PTI.

The survey was conducted in six districts including Colombo, Kandy, Badulla and Anuradhapura and covered more than 8000 students. The island newspaper said quoting ADIC officials.

The survey also revealed that six per cent of students over 12 years were addicted to tobacco in Colombo a substantial number of students had begun to use alcohol and tobacco before the age of 11 years.

