A Case Study through IR&D Method for Intervention and Control of HIV/AIDS in Chennai, India

Syed Ali Mujtaba
School of Mass Communication, Vels University, India
Email: syedalimujtaba@yahoo.com

Abstract- Interdisciplinary Research and Development (IR&D) are research and development that requires interaction among two or more disciplines. There is a growing trend to use IR&D method to tackle many pressing problems confronting societies and nations across the globe. One such problem is scourge of HIV/AIDS that typically falls in the realm of medical sciences. However, the dynamics of the problem requires the help of IR&D method to understand its complexities at the ground level and come up with measures for its control and prevention.

Keywords- Chennai, Commercial sex workers, HIV/AIDS, India, Investigative Journalism

I. INTRODUCTION

Chennai, the southern Indian metropolitan city and capital of Tamil Nadu state, is home to about six million people. Unlike Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata, the more cosmopolitan metros of India, Chennai has a conservative profile. However, when it comes to the HIV figures, the conservative image of the city, takes a backseat.

The World Vision India - Chennai Integrated HIV/AIDS Care (CIHAC) Project report of June 2005, points out that there are over 4000 HIV cases in Chennai. The Tamil Nadu AIDS Control Society gives the figure of 16,000 HIV cases and 8,500 cases of AIDS in the state.

II. FIELD STUDY

According to the field survey conducted by the Indian Community Welfare Organization (ICWO), an NGO working with female sex workers and the gay community in Chennai for close to 17 years, there are 6300 of female sex workers in Chennai city. The actual number could be much higher because there are many sex practitioners who may not have volunteered for the survey. The ICWO survey actually updates the 1992 figures of the World Health Organization (WHO) which had then identified 3000 sex workers in Chennai.

The ICWO survey using interdisciplinary research methodology focuses on the attitude, behavior and practice of commercial sex workers in Chennai. It...
classifies them into four categories; family-based, street-based, brothel-based and mobile sex workers.

Of the total sample of 6300 people, 4500 belong to the family category. People of this category live in residential areas and operate from their homes often without the knowledge of anyone, including their neighbors.

The operation is run by aged sex workers, with their own network of regular clients. New entrants soliciting services come to these family establishments only through special contacts and they are only allowed admission after their identity has been fully verified.

The street workers, who number about 1360, are the next largest category. They get their clients by waiting on the streets. Most of them carry on their work independently, though some rely on brokers for help in getting clients.

The preferred method of work is to wait on crowded streets, which provides more custom as well as relative anonymity to the transaction, as opposed to the less frequented localities. Bus stops, railway stations, cinema halls and beaches are the usual venues where the transaction is negotiated, from where they go to cheap hotels and lodges with their clients.

The third category consists of sex workers who work in brothels. Chennai does not have any distinctly identifiable sex work localities, as there are in Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkatta. However, there are brothels which function discreetly and openly in the residential areas of the city. Both types of brothels are heavily dependent on brokers for their clients. In the survey sample, 365 belong to this category.

The fourth category is made up of mobile sex workers, who only number between 90 and 110. Every evening, some five or six girls are taken out in a car or a van by brokers on particular routes to visit particular points.

Typically these girls are sent to the clients only on the basis of prior appointments. Certain hotels and resorts in and around the city are closely associated with this arrangement, since it forms part of their hospitality services. Under this system, the hotels procure the girls for their customers through brokers who even make arrangements to transport them if needed.

In this category of the profession, the girls generally have a different profile from those in the other categories of sex workers. Most of their clients are short term business visitors to the city. Given the nature of their clientele and the locales at which they provide services, the girls are expected to be more ‘polished’ and well dressed and consequently, their rates are higher.

The majority of the women in the profession come from outside Chennai with Andhra Pradesh accounting for 53 percent. Next is Tamil Nadu, with 23 percent, while the other two neighboring states of Karnataka and Kerala account for 14 and 10 percent. There is a fairly well organized and systematic method of recruiting the women into the city’s sex trade. Most are picked up from regular conduit points in the adjoining states at prices ranging from INR 100,000 to 300,000. Prices vary according to looks and those with fair skin are preferred over the dark ones.

The relationship between the broker and the newly recruited sex worker is governed by a contract. Brokers go periodically to the recruitment points and procure girls on 37 day contracts. The girls are paid 50 percent of the contracted sum up front as an advance while the remaining dues are paid on their return after the completion of the contract. For those who are set up at brothels, owners provide breakfast and lunch during their stay, while dinners are normally the clients’ responsibility.

Though the sex workers are on contract for 37 days, they eventually end up getting paid for only 30 days. Menstruation
and travel time are cited as reasons for cutting a week’s salary.

Since regular clients are always on the lookout for new faces, the brokers take one set of girls back and return with a fresh set. There are, however, many who end up staying back in the city after their contract expires for lack of opportunities elsewhere. This is what accounts for the large numbers of sex workers in Chennai city.

The number of working days is variable across the different categories. Brothel-based sex workers have a more demanding regimen since they work on all 30 days of the calendar month. As a result they deal with the maximum number of clients. Typically, since a sex worker attached to a brothel has to work without a break through the year, she has to cater to about 270 customers. Given that they have the maximum degree of physical contact, those who work in brothels belong to the medically high risk group. On the other hand, for those in the street-based, mobile and residential categories, work is relatively less demanding. On average, in a month they work for roughly 22, 16 and nine days, respectively.

For those who service clients outside their homes or brothels, the preferred venue for the majority is the client’s residence. Hotels and lodges are the next most utilized places. As far as the residential category, brothel and street sex worker categories are concerned, given the clandestine nature of the work, there are frequent changes of addresses and venues of transaction. Those attached to brothels change their addresses most frequently, even as often as once a month.

Earnings likewise are highly variable. The highest income earners are those in the mobile category, whose higher rates ensure an income of INR 6000 a month, though they work the least. Those who are attached to brothels earn in the vicinity of INR 4000 for a full month’s work. The residential and street based women earn the least, having to settle for average monthly incomes of INR 3000 rupees and 1500 respectively.

Majority of sex workers have primary education, are married, have children and are in the 26-35 age groups. Half of the respondents have a single child, 41 percent have two, and 10 percent have three children. The women’s main priority is the child’s future, and more than 75 percent do not want their children to follow in their own footsteps. More than 30 percent wanted to send their children to boarding schools while 14 percent thought it safer to leave children with their relatives. Tragically, however, more than one fifth are convinced that they will be unable to stop their children from entering the profession.

As far as clients are concerned, the majority approach sex workers directly. At any given time, the majority of them are new comers and only 30 percent are regulars. Interestingly, only 22 percent of the clients stated that the reasons for soliciting the services of sex workers were “immediate satisfaction of the sexual urge”. Some 11 percent even claimed lack of domestic privacy, primarily the presence of grown up children in crowded households.

In Chennai city, there are 150 full time sex brokers and 4500 part-timers. Brokers engage in two types of activity, procuring girls for brothels and serving as intermediaries between sex workers and clients. They get a 30 percent commission from the brothel owners for the supply of girls, besides a separate cut for bringing clients to the brothels. Most of the part time brokers are drivers of auto-rickshaws and taxis and rickshaw pullers, as well as tour and travel trade operators, bartenders, waiters and even watchmen. Some of the brokers eventually become full fledged brothel owners.

The entire sex industry in Chennai is said, flourishes under police protection, something not entirely unbelievable given that many ‘prominent’ middle-men and brokers have been around in this business for
quite some time. Owners of brothels that function openly and street sex workers pay a fixed amount of money to the police to avoid arrest and harassment.

Given this nexus between the sex industry and the police, the latter periodically go through the motions of brothel-busting and arrests, but only to meet the requirement of the minimum number of ‘cases’.

There is a pattern to the arrests of sex workers. The street based workers are arrested about twice a month, brothel-based workers once a month, whereas those from the mobile and residential categories are hauled up once in two months. Girls caught in such raids are produced before a magistrate where they pay a fine and after which they are set free.

Despite the precarious conditions of the work, the sex profession continues to attract a steady stream of girls. Most join the profession because of poverty and financial obligations, mainly family debt. Others land into this profession following failed marriage. In fact, as many as a third of the respondent said they came into the profession because their husbands had abandoned them. Social factors also have a role to play, as is evident from the fact that 9 percent say they entered the trade because their lovers had deserted them.

III. HIV/AIDS AWARENESS LEVEL

The level of awareness about sexually transmitted diseases is reasonably high, perhaps as a consequence of the numerous HIV prevention programmes that have been initiated by the government and non government organizations. More than two thirds of the interviewees are aware of being in a HIV high risk group. About 68 percent of the sex workers reported regular condom use. The remaining 22 percent do not practice safe sex for various reasons, while quite a few do not use condoms because of misconceptions. Some feel that they cannot contract HIV or other STDs because they are clean and healthy and have regular medical check ups. Others feel secure because they cater to regular clients whom they believe to be healthy. Some believe that washing themselves with soda immediately after every physical contact ensures safety. Then there are those who think that they are safe from HIV because they do not practice oral sex.

IV. CONCLUSION

The main objective of this paper is to share the knowledge gained through the systematic research done with the use of IR&D method on the sex workers in Chennai. The key issue the paper address is to profile the magnitude of the problem of HIV/AIDS in Chennai. This is done by mapping the total number of high risk people in the city who could be carries of the deadly disease. The paper also brings out the nature of the sex industry in Chennai, the condition, demography and background of the female sex workers and their attitude towards health and hygiene, and awareness about HIV/AIDS and STDs.

The paper submits that such study has quick impact on the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The multi pronged measures adopted following this study has dramatically led to the control of the spread of the disease and has helped in dramatic fall of the HIV cases in the city.

According to HIV Sentinel Surveillance and HIV Estimation figures of 2007, Tamil Nadu shows sustained declining trend in the number of HIV infections. The state has eight per cent of the total People Living with HIV/AIDS in India. This is significant decline because Tamil Nadu has notoriously led the country with high rates of HIV prevalence during 2000-2003. The sustained decline can be attributed to the State’s emphasis on prevention methods and the targeted intervention among the high risk groups. According to NACO figures prevalence among female sex workers is 4.68 per cent.
The paper uses the tools of investigative journalism, survey method of social works and disciplines like sociology, health sciences etc for its case study. It’s based on the finding of the empirical survey based on questioners that seeks information on sex workers, brokers and clients. The painstaking information gathered has implications beyond the scope of the subject and data obtained seeks to address many social issues pertaining to the rights of the sex workers to live and work in conditions that are less hazardous and demanding.

The basic contention of this paper is that IR&D has tremendous scope in research and development. The case study done on female sex workers in Chennai for the prevention of HIV/AIDS is seminal in tackling such issues. The study is pioneering in many senses, because only through the IR&D method one can reach to the bottom of the problem. Such study serves as a guide to the policies and programmers to be formulated to tackle such problems. More such empirical studies are required to have a semblance of the problem elsewhere and to evolve methods of its control and prevention.