

Vulnerability of Girls to HIV/AIDS

Kanthi WIJETUNGE (Sri Lanka)

Vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection due to social cultural, economic and legal discriminations against them can be considered as a gross human rights violation. Women and girls are at the highest risk of abuse and exploitation and studies have revealed that HIV/AIDS is fast becoming a “girls’ epidemic”. Since girls often lack basic information and services to protect themselves, they continue to face a spectrum of human rights violations including trafficking, prostitution and sexual abuse which might result in spread of HIV infection.

In spite of the fact that Sri Lanka remains as a low HIV prevalent country with a prevalent rate below 0.1%, it is reported that there are 5,000 HIV infected persons in Sri Lanka. Studies reveal that there is a growing tendency in the spread of the infection during the recent past. Sri Lanka is a country which has been embroiled in a brutal armed conflict for more than two decades and its population has been exposed to a climate of constant fear and insecurity throughout the country. Some children have grown up in the confines of refugee settings. In addition to fulfillment of their basic human needs, these children suffer from various human rights violations. It has been revealed that HIV prevalence rate has increased among older children particularly girls, due to lack of awareness, stigmatization and unsafe sexual practices. Armed conflict and consequent displacement have created conditions that make the spread of HIV more likely in the North and East.

By the time Sri Lanka faced the Tsunami tragedy on December 26, 2004, many girls lost their parents and had to seek assistance of unknown people for their survival. Initially, many had to be in refugee camps with nobody’s protection. Even during this crucial moment, some men tried to fulfill their sexual desires through these innocent girls. Consequently, many girls were subjected to rape and other forms of sexual harassment. It was revealed that in most instances, the perpetrators were their own relatives who took the guardianship of these girls in the absence of their parents.

In view of the above, a number of risk factors can be identified as contributory to the spread of the infection among girls in Sri Lanka. The country has a large youth population which is 28% of the total population and more than a half of that population is girls. Also the growing commercial sex industry; external and internal migration; displaced situations and the prevailing armed conflict are some of them.

Moreover, as girls and young women are expected to know little about sex and sexuality, they are subject to sexual abuse due to fear of violence. This lack of knowledge puts them at risk of HIV infection. Once girls get infected they fall ill causing damages to their future lives such as denial of their basic education. All their adulthood dreams are stolen from them before their own eyes. The impact of HIV/AIDS on the lives of girls is different from that of boys because HIV positive females receive less family support and resources for recovery and rehabilitation. Further, girls’ vulnerability to infection might increase where the effects of poverty is exacerbated by the low status of girls and women in society.

Girls belong to any social class might subject to serious problems due to their lack of knowledge on sexual matters. This was proved recently at a workshop held at a leading

girls' school in Colombo. Participants of this workshop were girls from affluent families. Many of them have encountered some kind of sexual problems. Being reluctant to discuss the matters in public, they sought answers to their problems through written questions. One girl has been continuing a sexual relationship with a driver who is a married person and used to be the driver of her school van. She was anxious to know whether she acquired any sexually transmitted disease. At this workshop, it was also revealed that many girls who sought counseling were from families where both parents are high level professionals. Since these parents lack time to be with their children, the gap was filled by outsiders. Under such circumstances, mostly girls become victims of unscrupulous people.

Progress in the fight against HIV infection depends on what is being done for women and girls to protect them from HIV infection. Their vulnerability can be easily prevented through raising awareness on their reproductive rights and sexual health. Measures that encourage equality, economic independence and education are also needed to combat the epidemic. The strategies adopted by the Government of Sri Lanka to mitigate the problem are commendable. The National Aids Council has been established recently under the chairmanship of the President with the objective of getting maximum support towards the national response through the involvement of political hierarchy. Further, an important policy statement was made to promote early intervention towards behavior development of the young generation in the country.