

## **“De-linking” Women from Vulnerability**

**Swapna MAJUMDAR (India)**

In the eastern Indian state of Bihar, young women are helping to reduce stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS. As the face of the “link worker scheme,” a program initiated by the Indian government’s National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) to raise awareness on the infection in rural India, this cadre of women is bringing change at the grassroots level.

There are over 100,000 people living with HIV in Bihar. Although it is not among the high prevalence states of India, it has emerged as a hot spot of the epidemic because of the high rates of migration. In Bihar, migration for work is often from tribal and poor communities with low levels of literacy and skill. A number of studies have documented that migrants have higher risky sexual behavior than non-migrants thereby spreading HIV from high prevalence areas to low ones.

All these factors coupled with high percentages of early marriage, little or no awareness of HIV/AIDS, unsafe sexual practices, a poor healthcare system and gender inequality has made rural Bihar highly vulnerable to the epidemic. The link workers are therefore crucial in the government’s bid to prevent the spread of infection as well as creating an enabling environment for people living with HIV/AIDS to seek treatment and live a quality life.

Sitamarhi is one of five districts in the state where the link worker scheme has been launched. The district, which has the highest HIV prevalence rate (3.70) in the state, shares its borders with Nepal and five other high risk districts in Bihar. The presence of a red-light area has increased its vulnerability to cross border and inter-state trafficking. Considering that the major mode of HIV transmission in India is through the sexual route, predominantly from unprotected sex with a commercial partner, the need to reach out to female sex workers is greater.

This is where the young women link workers are making a difference. Between the ages of 20 to 29 and from the community where the program has been launched, they are creating awareness about risks associated with HIV/AIDS. Although it was not easy to discuss sex and sexuality in a conservative milieu prevalent in Bihar, the persistence and commitment of women link workers has paid off. They have won the trust of female sex workers and are now treated as confidantes. Rama, a sex worker in village Radhaur, Sitamarhi said that it was because of link worker Sunita Devi that she understood the importance of protecting herself after learning about the infection in detail. “I make sure that the condoms she gives me are used by the clients. I also got myself tested after

she convinced me that treatment would enable me to lead a normal life in case I had acquired HIV. Thankfully, I tested negative. At least now I don't have to live in fear. I am happy that I listened to her.”



Ms. Sharmilla Bharti, a link worker

In Samastipur, another vulnerable district with high migration rates, link worker Sharmilla Bharti is facilitating women to take informed decisions. She has linked up with self-help groups (SHGs) to help to raise awareness among women traditionally restricted to their houses. Group support has given women confidence to take decisions to protect themselves.

Locating the Village Information Centre to spread information about health and HIV/AIDS among the local rural community in the government village crèche, which provides nutrition and health services for children in the 0-6 age group, has also helped to reach out to vulnerable women. Sharmilla Bharti has been able to motivate women workers in this centre to pass on messages of safety to the mothers while giving out food rations or making health cards for the children.

“We know that the men who go out for employment to a different district or state have sexual contact with other women. If they become infected, their wives will also acquire it. So I tell the women whose children are enrolled in the centre to protect themselves. We learnt this all from Sharmilla, the link worker,” said Anju Kumar, crèche worker in Khanpur village, Samastipur.

The strategy chosen by Sharmilla has been successful because this centre is also a source of information about return of migrants. Women share personal information about their husbands and are given condoms by the crèche worker or link worker. Considering almost 20 percent of the youth population in Samastipur migrates in search of jobs to the metropolitan cities like Mumbai and Delhi, this information is vital since this migrating population returns home only once a year during festivals. This is the time they can be persuaded to test themselves for infection.

Rural-urban migration plays an important role in heightening the risk of rural women to sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV/AIDS. But thanks to the link workers, vulnerable women in rural India are learning to protect themselves.