Addressing vulnerabilities of women who inject drugs

A community-based intervention model towards a holistic response to improve health and reduce HIV transmission among women who inject drugs in Manipur, India

Authors
Sunita Grote1, Sing Yumnam2, Shamnu Rao1, Charanjit Sharma1, Sonal Mehta1, James Robertson1
India HIV/AIDS Alliance, New Delhi   2Social Awareness Service Organisation, Imphal, India

Background
Largely neglected in the current HIV strategy in India, women who inject drugs are highly marginalised and need a comprehensive response to meet their specific health and social needs and reduce their vulnerability to HIV. According to government estimates, women constitute approximately 7% of people who inject drugs in India. With support from the Elton John AIDS Foundation, the Social Awareness Social Organisation (SASO), in partnership with the India HIV/AIDS Alliance, initiated Chanura Kol, a project that designs and implements a holistic, community-based response to meet the needs of women who inject drugs.

Methods
A quantitative knowledge-and-practices-oriented baseline study was conducted among women who inject drugs in Manipur. 100 women (18-45 years) who had injected drugs in the past three months were selected using proportionate sampling with 95% CI to estimate, women constitute approximately 7% of people who inject drugs in India. The study informed the design and implementation of the project model, which provides interventions to address women’s vulnerability relating to injecting drug use, sex work, social exclusion and other factors.

Results
The baseline study showed that:
- Only 12% of respondents reported not sharing needles or syringes over the previous three months. (See Graph 1)
- 4% reported consistent condom use over the previous month.
- More than half of the respondents reported STI-related symptoms (p<0.05).
- A high level of unmet contraceptive need (over 50% of respondents).
- 17% reported having experienced physical violence and 15% forced sex in the previous three months (p<0.05).
- 49% reported harassment, teasing and abuse by community members.

The baseline results confirm the need for interventions that address several sources of vulnerability to HIV, drug use and all-cause death. Social exclusion, violence, human rights violations, inadequately targeted service delivery, injecting and sexual practices all contribute to the health conditions of women who inject drugs in Manipur.

Conclusion
A high level of unmet contraceptive need (over 50% of respondents). More than half of the respondents reported STI-related symptoms (p<0.05). 17% reported having experienced physical violence and 15% forced sex in the previous three months (p<0.05).

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Contacts
Sunita Grote: sgrote@allianceindia.org
Sonal Mehta: smehta@allianceindia.org

A package of services addressing vulnerability from drug use, unsafe sex and rights violations is required to meet the needs of women who inject drugs.

Graph: Access to and Use of Clean Needles Among Women who Inject Drugs

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