

July 3, 2006 – ‘Flying Sex Workers’ have to give in to customers’ demands
By Sudhir Mishra

Kolkata.

After almost half an hour of conversation about her, when she was given a hundred rupee bill, she started crying bitterly. She said “Sir, I wasn’t always like this. The first time I entered into this business on Park Street, I had been hungry for three days. The first time I received 25 rupees and then I ate. In such a situation even knowing about HIV/AIDS, one has to bear with the demand of the customers of not using condoms, and there’s every chance of the customer leaving if we insist”.

There are three types of sex-workers in Kolkata. Firstly, there are those who reside and operate from the brothels of Sonagachi and Kalighat. Secondly, there are the call-girls who never come out in the open with their status. Finally, there are the ‘flying sex workers’, who look for their customers on a particular street, crossing, park and/or railway-bus station. In Kolkata, where this correspondent had gone on a ‘Kaiser Health Journalism Fellowship’ to study the extent and reasons of HIV/AIDS, he met Twarit Chakravarty, President of the West Bengal Positive Network. Chakravarty said that good work has been done in West Bengal to check HIV/AIDS, especially among sex-workers. It was on his advice that I met the officials of Kolkata Samaritans.

This organization works amongst the ‘flying sex workers’. Forty five-year old Shobha is associated with them. She is in charge of the sex-work, which begins at 10 at night on the roads of Park Street. Under her supervision, 22 girls go on a hunt looking for customers on the roads of this area late at night. It is Shobha’s responsibility to save them from goons and policemen and to distribute condoms, which are kept in her purse. In return, she gets 30 to 50 per cent of the sum received from each customer.

Shobha says she teaches her girls to use condoms every time they have sex and never get so drunk that they would forget to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS. If any customer refuses, they need to bring it to her notice. Shobha has the means to combat both the police and the hoodlums. Shobha introduced me to Meena and Pushpa, the two girls who work on Park Street.

Meena and Shobha said, “oftentimes customers don’t want to use a condom. If we resist, they get angry”. Jayanti, associated with the organization, says they are trying to develop leaders among the ‘flying sex-workers’ who can ensure that clients accept the use of condoms. It’s just the beginning, there is a real need to spread awareness. Around three thousand people are connected with West Bengal Network of Positive People.