

FOCUS ON AIDS IN THAILAND

by Mechai Viravaidya

The first AIDS case in Thailand was diagnosed in 1984. Since that time, the country has been able to identify HIV-positive cases before they have developed into full-fledged AIDS. But in an ironic twist, convincing policymakers--let alone the public--that a deadly disease still threatens the country has been exceedingly difficult.

Reports from the World Health Organization and from Thailand's Ministry of Public Health have not helped. Both sources report fewer than 100 cases of AIDS in Thailand and about 25,000 HIV-positive individuals.

These numbers, however, tally only those who have been tested through surveillance surveys or through diagnosis. When the figures are projected to the entire Thai population, a conservative estimate is 125,000 HIV--positive individuals--more than the

total number of hospital beds in Thailand.

Estimates go as high as 400,000, partly because no one can agree on the number of prostitutes and IV-drug users in Thailand.

In mid-1990, a nationwide survey by the military and based on a group of 32,000 men, ages 20 to 22, indicated that 1.7 percent are HIV-positive. In two northern Thailand provinces, the figure reached 11 percent. Surveys of commercial sex workers show that 40 to 72 percent of them were HIV positive.

Government and business hesitate to confront the linkage between AIDS and Thailand's prostitute problem because it threatens tourist spending, which has helped fuel the country's double-digit economic growth rate--Asia's highest. And, Thailand's widespread acceptance of prostitution exacerbates the problem. Many countries speak of

sub-groups of their population at risk, but Thai males' usage of prostitution puts the entire culture at risk.

Thailand will not be alone in Asia in experiencing the coming deluge of people with AIDS. Both Burmese fishermen visiting prostitutes in Thai ports and Burmese women working as prostitutes in Thailand have taken AIDS home. India has recorded a significant number of AIDS cases and China, Malaysia and the Philippines are not immune.

As things now stand, events will play themselves out like recordings of the African experience. While the past five years have belonged to economic progress and development in Thailand, the next decade could very likely belong to AIDS.

Excerpt from Healthlink, April 1991.



Sexuality and the Filipina Woman

From a broad social perspective, sexuality involves intimate human relationships; sexual desires, preferences, and pleasures; crucial decisions on getting married or staying single, whether or not to have children; personal self-esteem and psychological and emotional well-being.

Sexuality, therefore, cannot be reduced simply to genitality and biological determinism, i.e., defining the social functions of women and men on the basis of sex. Biological evidence itself shows that "an estimated two to three percent of the world's people are born hermaphroditic--with ambiguous genitalia" (Edgerton, 1964: 1289 cited by Cucchiari) and do not fall under the conventional categories of male and female. In given societies, homosexual preferences in a political or cultural context make issues of sexuality even more complex.

Too often, however, sexuality has been crudely and cruelly made to refer to the

sexual act itself and in reference only to the heterosexual experience, consequently denying the other reality that is homosexuality. This is a reality that has to be taken as an issue in sexuality. Unfortunately, in this dominantly homophobic world, homosexuality is effectively framed as a religious-moral issue especially in the cultural context.

The high fertility rate among Filipina women in the grassroots indicates, among other conditions, their limited subjective concept of sexuality. For them, and even more presumably for their husbands, sexuality is equated with genitality.

A significant observation is that peasant women, factory workers, and the urban poor usually describe sex as being used by the husband. Bound by a sense of wifely duty, the women experience sex as passive receptors of male virility and aggression and face unwanted pregnancies.

Many women see reproduction as the main, if not sole, function of sexual activity. This deeply ingrained attitude or belief has serious implications on their health and total well-being.

A feminist group, KALAYAAN (1989) wrote: "A core issue in the whole question of sex and sexuality is reproductive freedom. Women have become overused and uncared for baby machines operated by impersonal health care systems. Women's total loss of control over their bodies is seen not only in their almost total dependence on external systems but also on the crass, not far from inhuman/subhuman disregard by governments of women's welfare in their so-called population control policies."

Excerpt from InfoKit on Women's Health, March 1991, published by the Institute for Social Studies and Action (ISSA).